THE BLOCKBUSTER GAMES YOU'RE NOT PLAYING



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METAL GEAR SOLID V

Why this is Kojima's masterpiece

PLUS

- UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END
- HALO 5: GUARDIANS
- BLOODBORNE
- NO MAN'S SKY
- UNTIL DAWN
- BATTLEBORN
- THE ORDER: 1886
- THE TOMORROW CHILDREN
- FINAL FANTASY TYPE-0 HD

DOES STEAM HAVE TOO MUCH POWER?

"Steam is in a position to rewrite the market rules entirely"



50 BEST DEVELOPERS

Which teams are doing the very best work right now?

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

Pro gamers explain its rise and what will come next

THE FUTURE OF TOTAL WAR

The Creative Assembly reveals its next offensive

With institutions like the BBC regularly posting stories about massive attendances at live eSports events and asking questions on radio debate shows like 'Should pro gamers be considered athletes?', it's clear we've reached a curious tipping point for the professional gaming scene. There's now mainstream attention being paid to it in a way that's never been the case before. That said, it's still attention at arm's length. The focus is on the oddity of it. The unbelievable quantity of it. 'Can you believe 40,000 people filled a stadium to watch a *League Of Legends* tournament?'

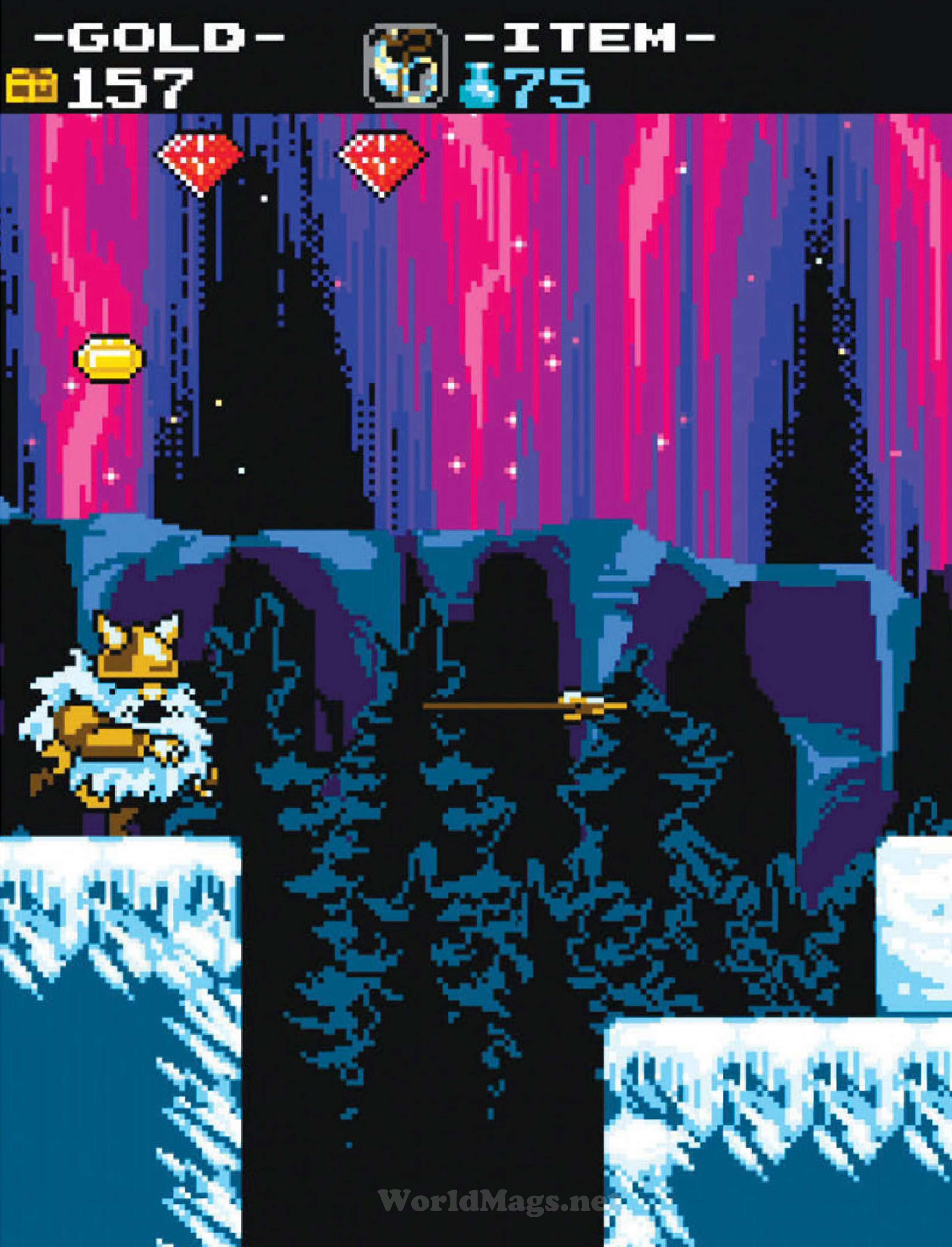
To my mind, anyone who dedicates themselves through heavy training and challenges themselves through fierce competition has to be considered a sportsperson on some level. Being a pro gamer may not be equivalent to being a footballer or heptathlete, but when you compare them to professional chess, darts or snooker players, I'd argue they have a case to at least be on that level. It's not about athleticism in the traditional sense, so much as a dedication to a 'pastime' that leads to excelling in that field.

Ultimately it will be the numbers that prove the concept of gaming as a sport. With more people attending tournament events and packing out arenas than even the most popular snooker players couldn't hope to fill, this debate is going to be over pretty soon. In the UK, that's going to be a longer process as we haven't embraced eSports to the same degree as others, but it's coming, and it's fascinating to watch it grow and see the consensus shift as it does.

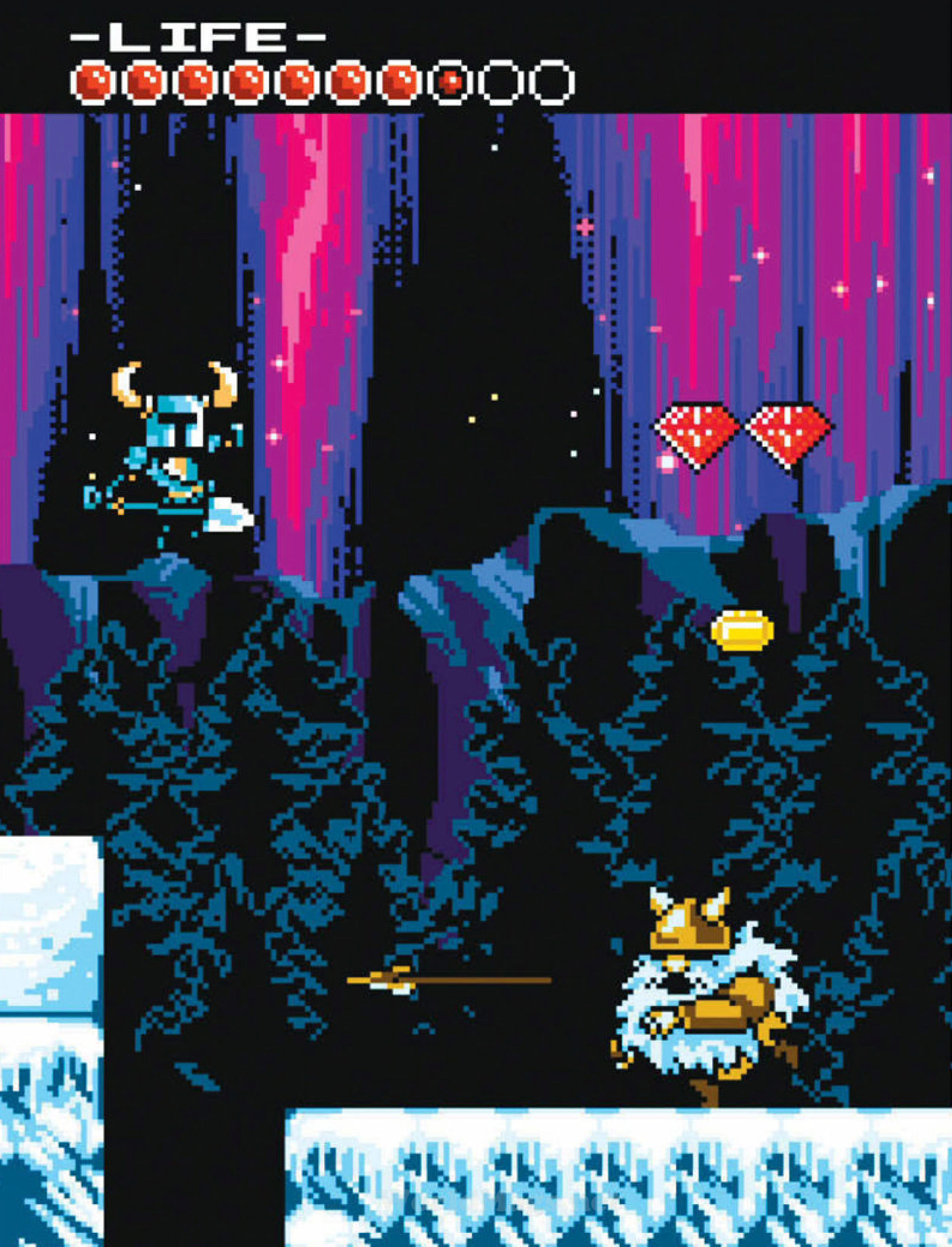
Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR



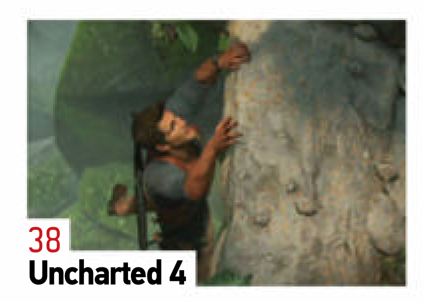


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METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN

Discover what the new Metal Gear Online is bringing to Kojima's latest



(WHEN GAMES DON'T GO EVERYWHERE)

Want to try an exclusive relationship?

→ The third-party console exclusive is back from the dead – but why? What's changed? And is it something that's going to last beyond the first couple of years of PS4, Xbox One and Wii U?

The age of the third-party console exclusive all but died with the last generation, with a focus on timed deals and DLC packages taking the place of what had been – for a very long time – *the* place to find a console's true gems. But then a strange thing happened this generation: they came back.

The Xbox One bagged *Titanfall*, *Dead Rising 3* and *Sunset Overdrive*; PS4 brought us *Final Fantasy XIV* and *InFamous: Second Son*; the Wii U even chipped in with *Bayonetta 2*, *Lego City Undercover* and *The Wonderful 101*. Not to mention the upcoming console exclusives like *Quantum Break*, *Street Fighter V*, *Persona 5* and *Devil's Third*. There are plenty more, too, and when you think about the returning timed exclusives – say hello, *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* – there really does appear to have been a resurgence in the culture of console exclusivity.



Above Nintendo exclusivity saved the *Bayonetta* sequel

From a business perspective, exclusives have a certain allure to them early on in a machine's life-cycle. "Console exclusives are more valuable at the start of a generation," explained Edward Zhao, business analyst at EEDAR, "since they convince early adopters, often the core audience, to buy in on a platform. If a player's network of friends become ensconced on one console, it's much less likely they'll migrate to a competitor." It's straightforward then – and expected – to see single-console third-party releases out in a machine's first year or so. *Dead Rising* on Xbox 360 (and the aforementioned third numbered entry), for example, or *Ridge Racer V* on PS2, *Star Wars Arcade* on the

DATA STREAM → MICROSOFT AND TURN 10 HAVE ANNOUNCED FORZA MOTORSPORT 6 FOR XBOX ONE

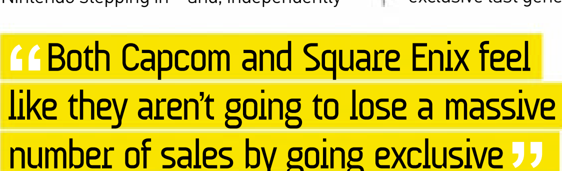
32X, *Rogue Squadron II* on GameCube – the list goes on.

But why do studios decide to go down the exclusive route? Why would a studio choose to intentionally limit how many people can play its game on consoles by shutting out two thirds of the potential audience? We asked Mikael Haveri of consistent Sony collaborators Housemarque why his studio – and others – would choose to do such a thing. "From a studio perspective, there are advantages to being an exclusive," he said. "For example, a huge marketing push from the platform holder at all major events – meaning your game becomes an ace in the sleeve."

This increased attention on the game is something that just couldn't be done without the help of the likes of Sony, Microsoft or Nintendo. And this attention isn't just something to be focused on the guaranteed sales successes, as Haveri continued: "Not everything can be quantified by the audience. Think *Bayonetta 2*: it might not have happened without Nintendo stepping in – and, independently from the sales, it's a siren's call for hardcore customers (i.e. the ones willing to invest more in a platform). Perception is sometimes as important as the numbers."

IT'S THIS NEED to stand out and appeal to certain sections of the gameplaying public that is central to many elements of the exclusivity discussion, and it's clear that – especially early on in a console's lifespan – there's a need for a platform holder to stamp its authority on a particular demographic. But, as Haveri explained to us, it's not just down to the games: "A sense of identity in the mind of a gamer can consist of a lot of different things – hardware performance, quality of content, scope of additional content, etc. Currently Sony, for example, has gained a lot of goodwill with its '4 the gamers' slogan and then being able to back it up with content catered to gamers."

But while the battlegrounds of 'my console is faster than yours' will always be contested, the apparent death of the exclusive last generation saw one constant fall by the wayside. Why is it back? Some hypothesise it's related to the death of the mid-level, 'single-A' developers and publishers like THQ, meaning there wasn't much in the way of affordable output that suited exclusives in the PS3/360/Wii generation. As such, they fell by the wayside.



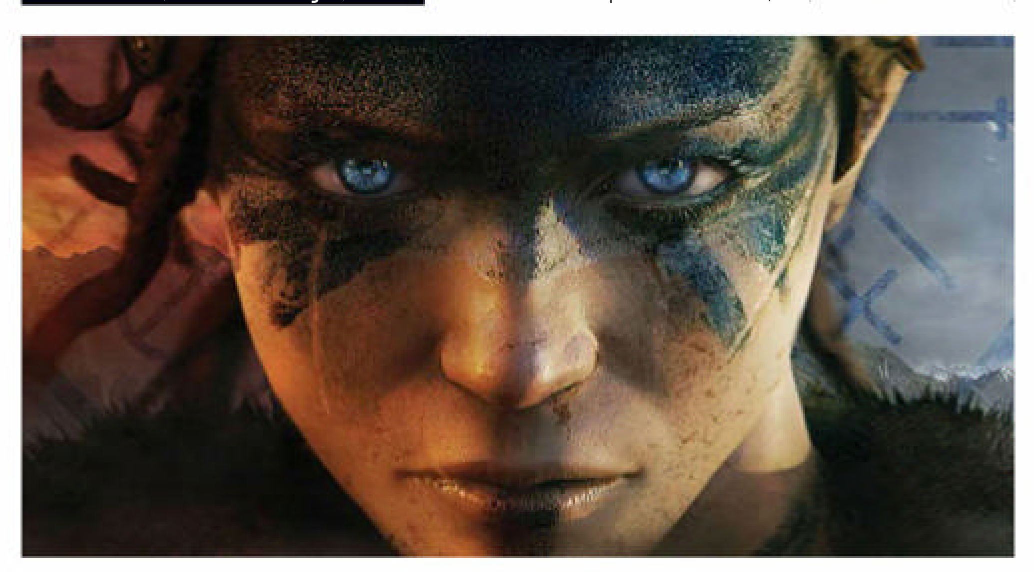
Above A guarantee of cash from a publisher like Microsoft can mean studios are free to be more ambitious with their projects. *Quantum Break* wouldn't be half what it is without Microsoft's backing.

Above Exclusives can ostensibly be from third-parties but, as with *The Order: 1886*, come with a dollop of development help from the platform holder.

But now we're in the era of the indie – the big companies are paying attention as they realise that, while an entire platform can't be built around them, there's more than enough interest in the smaller games to justify splashing out on exclusives. Have the indies stepped up to fill the single-A vacuum? Ninja Theory's Dominic Matthews said yes: "The platform holders have opened their doors to independent developers, both small indies and mid-sized teams, who want to develop and publish games themselves.

"I've seen a big shift in the approach of platform holders, where they are now doing all they can to help studios publish their own games. Being given the chance to create your game yourself, in your own way, and then to be able to publish it directly onto a new-gen console is a fantastic prospect for lots of developers. This can be done without an exclusivity partnership, but working very closely with a platform holder helps."

But the big hitters are coming too – and the likes of *Street Fighter V* are only coming to one console. Even the next Lara Croft adventure, *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*, won't be seeing the light of the PS4 until it's been on the Xbox One for quite a while. While these decisions have confused some, Zhao said he believes it makes absolute sense: "Both have extenuating circumstances which can mitigate the loss of sales on a platform. For *Street Fighter V*, it's about how the PS3 was the console of choice






THE BIG EXCLUSIVES

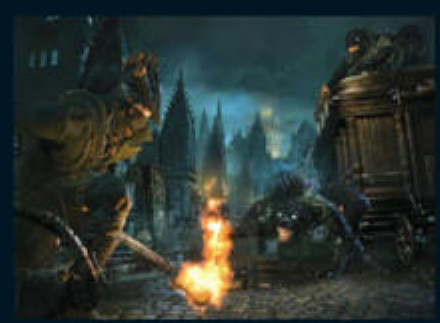
There are plenty of them coming in the next couple of years – and there'll be plenty more beyond to show just how willingly the return of the single-platform holder game has been accepted



STREET FIGHTER V

FILE UNDER: The Surprise

After the success of *Street Fighter IV* and its countless spin-offs, it was almost guaranteed there would be a fifth numbered entry in the brawler's paradise. For *Street Fighter V* to be exclusive to the PlayStation 4, though, was a genuine surprise even to experienced analysts of the industry. No *Street Fighter* game has been confined to a single console, bar the second version of *Street Fighter III* and the EX 3D spin-offs. Even *Street Fighter II*, the game associated with the SNES, came out on plenty of other formats.



BLOODBORNE

FILE UNDER: The Expected Return

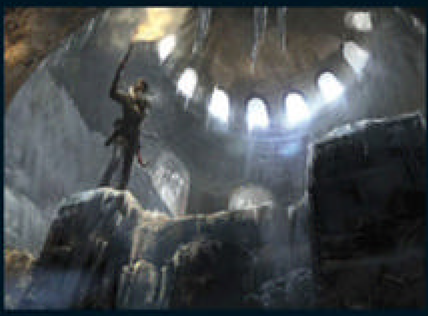
It might be an original title, but *Bloodborne* is the spiritual successor to From Software's *Demon's Souls* – and just like the *Dark Souls* predecessor, it's PlayStation-only. Miyazaki's original *Souls* game on PS3 felt experimental – even though it was itself a spiritual successor to the also-PlayStation-only *King's Field* series – but the rocketing popularity of the two multiformat *Dark Souls* releases meant a PS-only return for a Miyazaki game was something Sony just *had* to nail down. *Bloodborne* is the result.



CUPHEAD

FILE UNDER: The Exciting Newcomer

If the indies are indeed to be the new battleground of the exclusives, then it's going to be titles like *Cuphead* that will define this area of the business. A subversive, surrealist run-and-gun game with visuals inspired by cartoons of the Thirties, *Cuphead* really isn't a game that you'd see coming from any of the major studios and costing millions of dollars – and it certainly isn't something that would be a console exclusive if that were the case. No, this is the sort of thing that we'll see more of over the coming years.



RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER

FILE UNDER: The One Where Everyone Got Confused

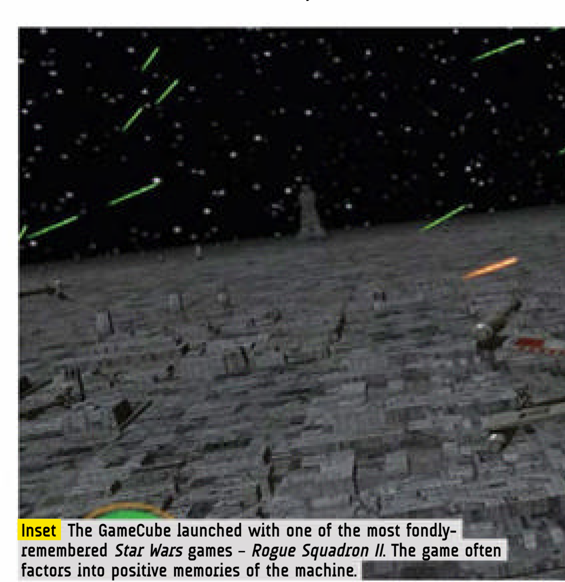
Announced as 'exclusive' to Xbox, *Rise of the Tomb Raider* made half the Internet explode with rage. Eventually Microsoft's Phil Spencer cleared it up, confirming the next *Tomb Raider* would be exclusive to Xbox but only as a 'timed' deal. "I get the reaction I see," Spencer told Eurogamer. "If I'm a PlayStation person, all of a sudden I feel like the franchise has gone… Where this thing will go over time, just like *Ryse*, we'll see what happens with the game."

for fighting games and how this trend is likely to continue for the PS4. For *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*, it's about the potential sales cannibalisation if they competed against *Uncharted 4*. Both are slated for a 2015 Q4 release. Thus, both Capcom and Square Enix feel like they aren't going to lose a massive number of sales by going exclusive."

Haveri agreed these bigger games were things that might confuse those not approaching from a business perspective: "Sometimes business decisions seem weird from an outsiders perspective," he said. "I'm sure that brand portfolios as legendary as Capcom's are constantly considered by many interested parties. If only it was as easy as buying an idea to create a hit exclusive… In the end, all franchises that have potential for exclusivity will not come cheap."

AND AS MATTHEWS told games™, cost is always a consideration for studios: "The fixed retail price of games has meant that the big publishers have to compete on ever-growing feature lists in their games and not price… Huge development costs mean that the big publishers have to do what they can to hit their targets, and in some cases it makes sense to work directly with a platform partner exclusively to give the game the best chance of success."

But there's another side to exclusivity, especially when speaking about indie developers – resources. *Volgarr The Viking*, while released first on PC, was a console exclusive on Xbox One not because of deals in place with Microsoft, but because the two-person team behind it, Crazy Viking Studios, didn't have the time or money to make the



Inset The GameCube launched with one of the most fondly-remembered *Star Wars* games – *Rogue Squadron II*. The game often factors into positive memories of the machine.



SUPERGIANT GAMES HAS REVEALED TRANSISTOR HAS SOLD 600,000. BASTION HAS REACHED 3 MILLION

Inset Just because a studio does a lot of work with a particular platform holder, doesn't mean it will stay that way forever. Insomniac's release of *Sunset Overdrive* on Xbox One was seen as a 'betrayal' by some.

> "All franchises that have potential for exclusivity will not come cheap"
>
> **Mikael Haveri, head of self-publishing, Housemarque**

game for other formats. "As a small indie developer with low resources (literally one programmer and one artist), we can only really afford to develop for one platform at a time," Taron Millet, of CVS, explained.

"Xbox One was the cheapest because Microsoft offer free dev kits as part of the ID@XBOX program, thus we went with it first." So this wasn't a decision motivated by any kind of platform loyalty, or one under any stipulations of keeping *Volgarr* away from other formats for a fixed period of time, but was instead simply the most economical decision for such a small studio.

Millet clarified the studio's stance: "If Sony and Nintendo offered free dev kits as well, we probably would have picked based on whichever platform had the most demand instead. We did not sign an exclusivity deal with Microsoft and still plan to release Volgarr on other consoles as time and funds allow."

So is this the rebirth of the exclusive? Zhao didn't think so – you can understand why, from a more analytical business point of view: "As we progress further into the generation, each additional exclusive will have less power when it comes to selling a console. It's likely that exclusivity deals will mostly focus on DLC." As far as the business side of videogames is concerned, this is a simply a characteristic of the early days of a console, not the rebirth of what was once one of the most exciting elements in gaming.



Above Platform exclusives are very important in the early stages of a console's life, and good ones – like *Resogun* – can bring the likes of Sony, Nintendo or Microsoft the all-important extra few sales.





Inset This return to a culture of exclusives isn't a completely good thing, mind. We do end up with the odd *Sonic Boom: Rise Of Lyric* – though that's more down to the game being bad than it being an exclusive.

A NEW JOB LISTING FOR MEDIA MOLECULE HINTS AT A MUSIC CREATION-DRIVEN GAME UPCOMING

(OPINION)

GTA V rises again

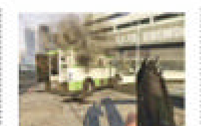
As Heists finally arrive for GTA Online we reflect on a game that continues to give back to its fans even if it sometimes takes a little while to do so



When Take-Two CEO Strauss Zelnick described *Grand Theft Auto V* as "the gift that keeps on giving" to FOX Business in the US last April, he was referring to the way in which the game's online micro transactions kept the money flowing to Rockstar and its parent company. But frankly we could have said the same about how it has continued to evolve and improve over the last 12 months too. *GTA V* was one of the best games of the last generation of consoles and *GTA Online* has been persistently reminding us of its quality.

Each new, completely free update has brought with it new missions, vehicles, outfits, weapons and more. What most of us have been waiting for however is the promised co-op Heist missions, now finally launching for both last- and current-gen versions of *GTA Online*. We wouldn't say we've exactly been treading water in the last year, though. *GTA Online* has been a glorious excuse to experience the world Rockstar North created without the trappings of predetermined story or characters to weigh us down.

GTA Online is the true sandbox and, while it has its limitations (money, ammo, weapons and cars being something that take a little grinding in order to reach a comfortable level), this is the purest form of San Andreas we could wish to experience. It's a world detailed and populated enough to entertain, but also blank enough to inspire players' own creativity. From inventing heists of their own to becoming San Andreas photographers or stuntmen, you don't have to look far on YouTube or much further afield to see that *GTA* is helping to create even more spin-off entertainment. Some have even gone so far as to create movie trailers using nothing but in-game assets from *GTA Online*.



Above Why wait for the Heists when you could create your own crime capers? Chasing down armoured trucks and inventing elaborate getaways has been a pleasurable pastime for many in the last year.

And while the streets of Los Santos may be a jungle in the open multiplayer arena, the comfort of playing in a private game with friends or even attempting to play *GTA Online* solo (a curious exercise in virtual isolation) is something worth exploring. While playing the game in the open can lead to the kind of ruthless behaviour we would have thought was better suited to the wastelands of *Fallout*, playing in a more private setting can allow you to enjoy the nuances of the AI behaviour, the scenery and opportunities for creating stand-out moments that don't require cut scenes to justify them.

AND SO NOW we step into the new Heist missions, which are very much the opposite of that, with a tight crew of thugs. This is like bringing the story mode right back into the online setting, which given the freedom we've enjoyed up until now may be a little bit of a culture shock, but *GTA Online* is broad enough to embrace many



> "It's a world detailed and populated enough to entertain, but also blank enough to inspire players' own creativity"



Inset Trying to navigate the streets of Los Santos in an open online session can be a treacherous undertaking, but a fun one so long as you keep your wits about you and are armed to the teeth.



CONTROVERSIAL GAME HATRED HAS BEEN GIVEN AN ADULTS ONLY (AO) RATING BY THE ESRB IN THE STATES



different styles and delivery systems for gaming moments. In fact it was exactly because the story modes' own Heists were poorly suited to the online sphere that they've taken so long to arrive according to Rockstar.

The key is making sure everyone has something fun to do. In single-player there was only ever really a need for at least one of the three leads to be doing something interesting. The game would force you into their shoes at key moments or let you switch freely so you could decide what role you wanted to play at any time. Online, in a four-person crew, you don't have that luxury and no one is going to want to be the getaway driver stuck in the car while their mates get to have fun.

The structure that's been devised for the Heists is a complex (by comparison to the rest of Online's missions) but inventive one, with one player designated as crew leader and responsible for bringing the crew into the mission, fronting the money, assigning roles and setting cuts to each member. The leader gets paid at the end, everyone else can earn by fulfilling their mid-stage objectives leading up to the big job. And those can include just stealing the right car, infiltrating a police station, working undercover, hacking, stealing a jet from an aircraft carrier (something new revealed in the Heists trailer) or many other things.

What we've seen so far of *GTA Online* Heists has shown a variety of ideas and potential for chaos that makes playing solo a lot of fun, but should make co-op play insanely enjoyable. We looked forward to getting to try out the story-mission heists with friends, but frankly what Rockstar has come up with is so much more. And like everything else *GTA Online* has delivered, it's free to all who have the game already. Truly, the gift that keeps on giving.

MAKING OUR OWN FUN

Many players couldn't be bothered to wait for the Heists to arrive for GTA Online, so they made their own entertainment

YOU ONLY LIVE FOREVER



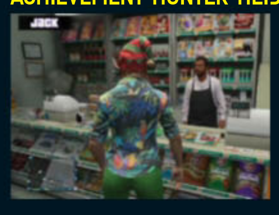
Photographer Casey Brooks had a novel idea when he decided to document life inside *GTA V* as a photo diary. Rather than comment as an outsider, he began to write a story for the NPCs he saw and photographed in the game.

THE AMAZING STUNTMAN



There are plenty of stunt performers in *GTA Online* these days, but RedKeyMon on YouTube is one of the best. The insane feats of speed, dexterity and timing achieved in these videos needs to be scene to be believed. Truly awesome stuff.

ACHIEVEMENT HUNTER HEISTS



The Rooster Teeth and Achievement Hunter guys didn't wait for Heists to arrive – they created their own. Regularly hilarious, often destructive and rarely successful, they go through planning, preparation and execution.

GTA V TILT SHIFT

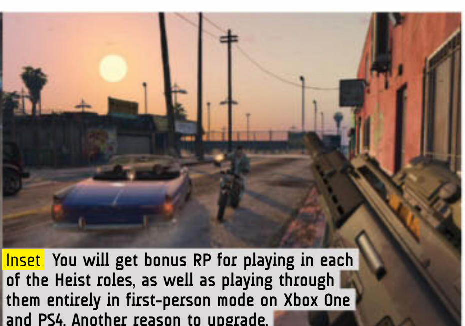


Making San Andreas look tiny using Tilt Shift techniques is pretty common these days, but one of the first we got to enjoy was from GTA Series Videos on YouTube. Watching this tiny living world in time-lapse is really quite fun.



Inset Flight School is just one example of how Rockstar has continued to enhance the online side of *GTA* post-release with free content. It brings new planes and a host of new missions.





Inset You will get bonus RP for playing in each of the Heist roles, as well as playing through them entirely in first-person mode on Xbox One and PS4. Another reason to upgrade.

AS OF THIS MONTH YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO CHANGE YOUR CHARACTER NAME IN MINECRAFT FOR FREE

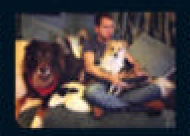
(CLIFFY B ON HOW TO SELL A GAME IN 2015)

"The community are evangelists and we're the preachers"

→ **Cliff Bleszinski took two years out of game development. Now, just before his new studio BossKey unveils its first game (codenamed BlueStreak), we sat down to discuss how games publicity is changing, and how Bleszinski plans to take advantage of the social era of gaming…**

How exactly would you describe open development?
Well, when I say 'open development' what I mean is that I want to make the user feel like a developer, too. It's getting back to the roots for me, it's why I got back into the industry [after a two year break]. I get to play with all these new toys – so I'll walk into the programmers' suite and say like 'Oh man, that new weapon is cool' and they'll say 'What? I only uploaded that about five minutes ago!' I can get involved in that crazy tight feedback loop that makes games go from good to great easily, and we can get the users directly involved with that, too.

How different is open development from the closed, triple-A publishing model that you've worked with before?
We expose as much as we can without ruining any PR or marketing plans that go with it, as well. If you want to do transparent development – which in my mind is *absolutely* the way to go – you have to be aware that the traditional PR and marketing bump is still a great way to create the waves in the pond, so you still need to do that in place of being completely transparent 24/7. What we're looking at doing, to some extent, a hybrid approach – our publisher [Nexon] is down with that, but we've got to be careful how we expose things. If we just said 'Screw it' and wanted to talk about anything, we could, but there'd be sacrifices we'd make in doing that. We want to announce the game's title, cool. But if we just shot it out there on a subreddit, we'd sacrifice unveiling it at a PAX panel and all the press coverage that would entail.



Above Bleszinski chills with his dogs at his home in LA.

Do you still have a traditional PR schedule, then?
We do, yeah. But lining up the schedule with the transparency stuff is proving really difficult – right now, a lot of studios are going completely indie: transparency, build lists, willingness to talk about any thing at any time. Or, you know, you've got Blizzard and *Overwatch* – they just announced it at their own E3, and that announcement trends worldwide. We're aiming for somewhere in the middle – working with press, working with marketing dollars, working with *people* to get our name out there. We're getting a slow but steady following right now. Any time someone does something in the community, me or [Rohan Rivas, key communicator, BossKey] call people out and give them the digital equivalent of the Gold Star. It's like we're spreading our religion to a new world, and the community are our evangelists and we're the preachers.

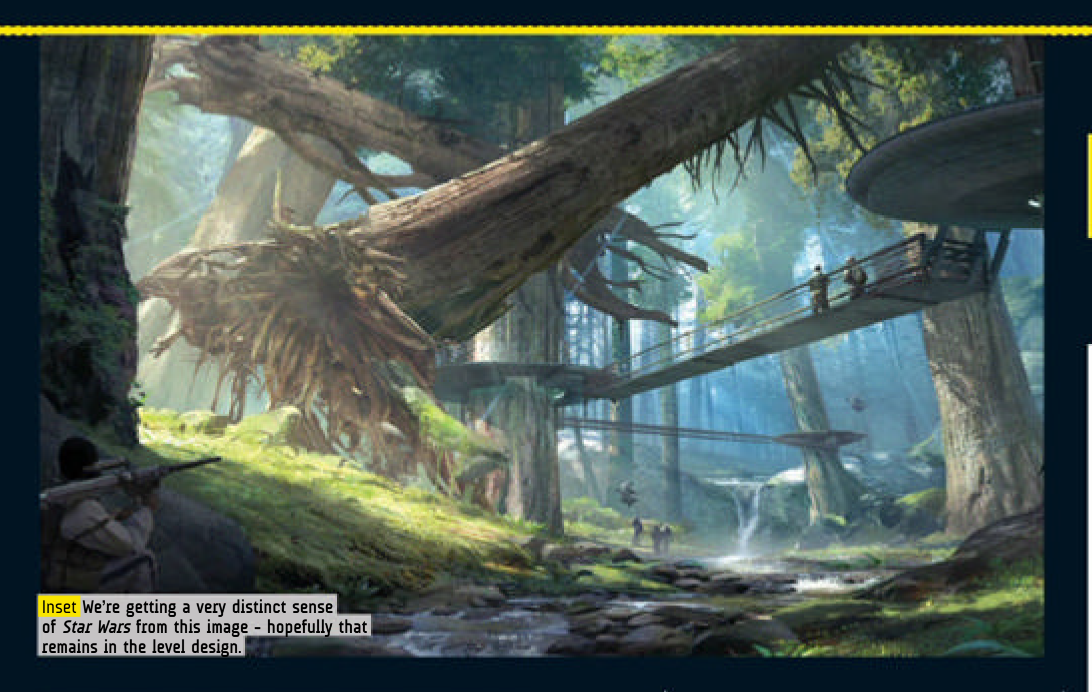
So do you think the 'cult of personality' in the games industry is now more potent than any kind of structured PR campaign?
You can go on any of the social mediums and construct a really funny or insightful



Right Bleszinski stands beside fellow BossKey founder (and COO), Arjan Brussee.



A NEW DARK SOULS SPEED RUN RECORD HAS BEEN SET OF 49 MINUTES, 55 SECONDS BY KAHMUL78



Inset We're getting a very distinct sense of *Star Wars* from this image – hopefully that remains in the level design.

> "I'm sick of doing the scripted moments – you shoot the thing, the bridge collapses – because it's all the same shit"
>
> Cliff Bleszinski, studio head, BossKey

tweet, but if you're a game developer, people just want to hear your opinion on games. If you talk about anything else, there's a vibe of 'Shut the fuck up and keep talking about your videogames'. People forget that *Gears* [*Of War*] is owned by Microsoft now, and *not* me, so when I try [and talk about BlueStreak] online, there's always a struggle with diverting people back to the point at hand – you've got to find a friendly way of saying 'Hey, we're doing this now, let's try something new!'

The thing we're going for with this game is to kind of play out the tribal nature of humanity. Some games tack on clans at the tail-end of whatever it is they're building, but I kind of want to lead with that and really get players to have rivalry between their environments. The other thing is describability – the thing about the rise of YouTubers is that these are the Howard Cossells, these are the John Maddens of the new sports. So the games that'll appeal the most to YouTubers are the games that they can describe the most about to their users.

We're building a 'core shooter – a game that will take a lot of skill to master. I do things about once a week that look *awesome* within the mechanics we're giving you – someone out there will be able to do that all the time, make it look as easy as an NBA player makes pulling off a trick shot look. You go to a ballet show, you go to MMA, you watch that because those guys make it look easy. The more describable your game, the more likely you are to have these commentators commenting on these YouTube moments.

'YouTube moments' is an interesting metric for how you see your game picking up fans…

Well, it's a bit like 'How many animated .gifs can your product yield?' right? I'm sick of doing the scripted moments – you shoot the thing, the bridge collapses – because it's all the same shit. And it's expensive. Even bugs are almost a feature these days. Even Activision were fighting it recently, saying 'All *Call Of Duty* glitch videos will be taken down', but it's sometimes a good thing. When some crazy physics glitch happens and everyone's trying to recreate it, it's like they're crowdsourcing QA to some extent. It's free publicity. And you can't argue with the power of that.

Below We're expecting 'BlueStreak' to be somewhere between *The Warriors* and *The Last Of Us* – resounding with that human versus human tribalist mentality.

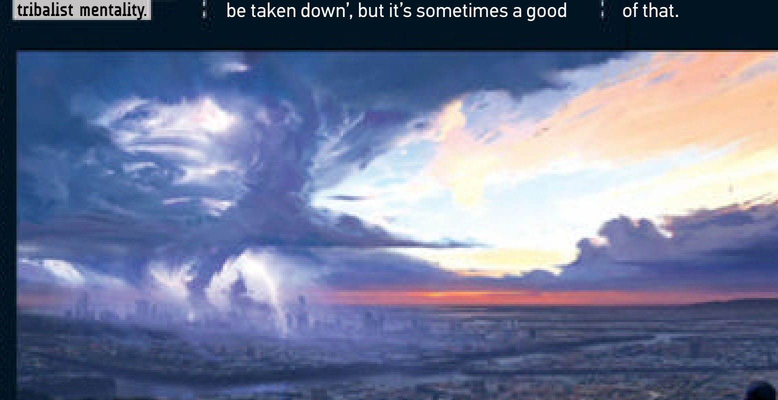
HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE TWITTER?

We asked Bleszinski how social media has changed during his career…

"Microsoft did work a lot with the press, and the press will hurt you as much as they'll help you," he explains. "I came up with the *Gears* press machine just about when clickbait became a thing.

"So anything I said would get boiled down and become 'Bleszinski says this' and people would take that as fact without actually reading anything that was said. I was a willing victim of that in the 2006-2009 period, so I'm trying to find a good medium now. The game of Telephone [the whispering/communication game] is more alive than ever right now, and if I do an interview with a journalist that then turns my words into a clickbait article and it gets to the top of Reddit or N4G or something, I can quickly and easily get online and correct the context of it.

"At the end of the day, though, 140 characters is an absolutely terrible context to explain anything other than a joke or a brain-fart. People try to debate serious topics like sexism or the American police state on Twitter, and it really just isn't the right forum for it."





BAY TEK GAMES HAS REVEALED ITS NEW ARCADE MACHINE, A 91" TALL, 41" SCREEN VERSION OF FLAPPY BIRD



Is single-player dead?

→ *Destiny* continues to draw in 3.5 million players a day, *World Of Warcraft* soldiers on as the king of the MMO uninterrupted, *Evolve* is ready to herald in a new age of asymmetrical multiplayer and Nintendo is making sure to keep local co-op alive with its focus on party games – *Mario Kart*, *Smash Bros* and *Splatoon* to name but a few. We turned to you, to see whether you preferred single- or multiplayer titles, and why…

■ Online multiplayer is way too serious, these days. I still enjoy local multiplayer, but otherwise? Single player FTW.
@pablo_0151, Twitter

■ Local multiplayer can be fun, like on *Rock Band* or *Mario Kart*, but online is a test of patience – casual players get paired up against experts and people with slow or shaky Internet connection are screwed.
@ericismyidle, Twitter

■ Online games have their place and their fans, but there will always be games that cater to the single player. Some of my personal favourite games of all time – *Half-Life 2*, *Shadow Of The Colossus*, *Mass Effect 2*, *Portal*, *Zero Escape*, *Dark Souls* – are predominantly single player experiences that focus on involving the player in the game world and want to tell a story. Long may they live…
Andy O'Flaherty, Facebook

■ Most of my most cherished gaming memories are from single-player games. Where else can I lose myself at my own pace in the worlds and stories created by highly talented developers. There is a place for multiplayer but nothing beats an engaging story in single-player.
Rob Hayes, Facebook

■ I have some very fond memories playing *Gears* over the first three iterations with my friends. But life pressures mean that we haven't played online together in years. The day single-player content dries up is the day I'll stop being a gamer
Alexi Gaynanov, Facebook

■ Single-player only for me… if it disappears forever, I'll be a retro gamer from then on.
@ivobosman, Twitter

■ We need a new *Elder Scrolls* game to knock all these multiplayer games outta the park and put single-player back on the map.
@addison396, Twitter

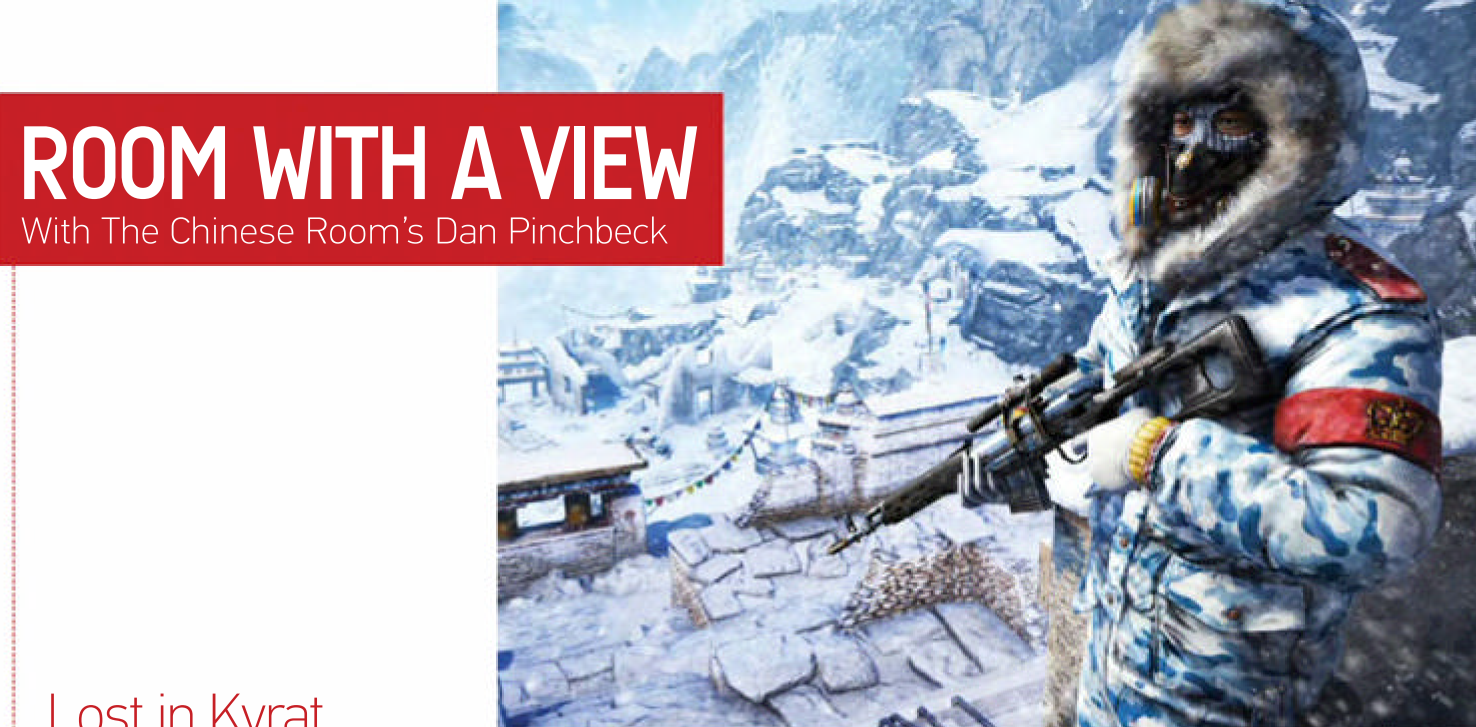
■ I do enjoy multiplayer…but, at 44, the reactions aren't what they were. I was constantly put on my arse playing *Destiny*.
@raindog1970, Twitter

■ Our office is divided. Game mechanic lovers also love multiplayer. Story-heavy people are all about single-player.
@The_Kouncil, Twitter


FOOLS BOAST
OF WHAT THEY
WILL DO.
HEROES
DO IT.
HALF THE WORLD
'Grabbed me and refused to let go'
George R.R. Martin
JOE ABERCROMBIE
WIN
AN iPHONE 6!
Enter now at
HarperVoyagerBooks.co.uk/sfn
THE FOLLOW UP TO SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER
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ROOM WITH A VIEW

With The Chinese Room's Dan Pinchbeck



Lost in Kyrat



Let's talk about signposting, emergence and story. Good signposting in games is really, really bloody difficult. Too strong and you end up patronising the players and robbing the world of discovery. Too little and they wander around in circles cursing your name. Worse than that (and this is a contentious, if obviously true statement), some players are very skilled and smart and others play like lobotomised cattle with greased bananas strapped to their hooves. And you have to cater for them all.

Ubisoft has always been pretty good at appeasing cattle and mental athletes alike, and in a large open world like *Far Cry 4*'s Kyrat, opting for a combination of map screen and localised signposting is a good plan. Up close, verticality becomes critical; sink holes and gorges drive the player through locations; the innate wish to climb mountains guarantees players will find the elusive temples; and there's the normal run of colouration and spawn points to concentrate the action. Chuck in some smoke plumes for outposts and you can navigate Kyrat on a basic level pretty easily. Now, it's an amazingly intense, interesting and immersive experience to play *Far Cry 4* without using the map screen. Running the story missions is near impossible because it really exposes how difficult it is to mix scale and openness with strong signposting. But local, free exploration is boosted hugely in enjoyment, as you stop it being a question of running icon to icon. You end up climbing the mountain simply because it's there – not because there's a Golden Path mission at the top of it. Surprise enters back into the world, the raw delight of discovery. Emergence between local residents and wildlife really blossoms and bursts into life.

> You end up climbing the mountain simply because it's there… Surprise enters back into the world, the raw delight of discovery

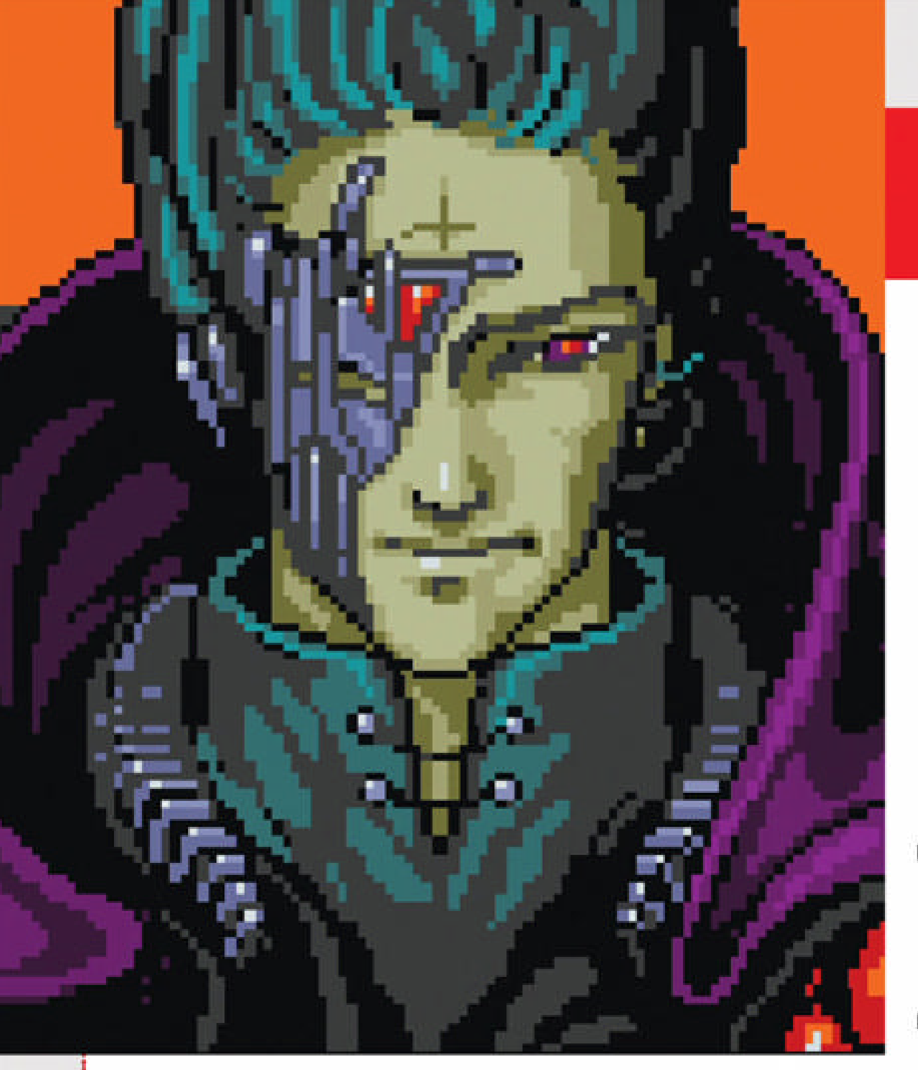
Of course, this isn't a gazillion miles away from the original *Day Z* experience, but with multiplayer murder squads replaced with yaks (fusing the two to create a multiplayer yak-based murder simulator is, of course, a kind of gamer's Shangri La I'd reckon) – and raises the gauntlet for studios like us who traffic in story. You can feel that tension in the game too. The story missions eat up the screen, bombarding you with content to compete with the raw, simple joy of unstructured exploration. And we're still in that interim period of development where we have to use linear point-to-point missions into an open-world space, rather than dropping story units into place ahead of the player wherever they happen to be.

Because Kyrat is gorgeous as Pagan Min's suit but at as dumb as Hurk – it's responsiveness is all on the surface. At the other end of the spectrum are pure procedurals that sacrifice depth for emergence (the jury is out on *No Man's Sky*, though I've got high hopes). But the sweet spot is in the middle: a world and a story that has all of the writer/designer's craft, but the capacity to redefine and relocate this as the play experience defines it. When we get this right, then you can drive a player through in-world signposting alone, and reap the benefits of emergence without sacrificing design. Until then, it's worth hitting Kyrat without the map and letting the mountains speak for themselves. Either way, it's the most fun you'll have setting fire to a badger this year.



Seeing where your feet take you in Kyrat can be a wonderfully emergent experience.

Dan Pinchbeck is the creative director at The Chinese Room, currently working on Everybody's Gone To The Rapture. His views aren't necessarily representative of **games**™



KONGETSU

PLEASE BE EXCITED

Please look forward to more information



There have been quite a few instances lately of comments made by Japanese developers through translators being taken out of context or losing their primary point simply as a result of both questions and answers having to repeatedly hop the language barrier. It's nothing new, of course, but it has become increasingly rare over the years, particularly as Japanese and Western interview techniques have grown apart. While I've done my fair share of English language interviews with subjects so on message that I've actually had to look around for the autocue, clever questioning and pressure can still sometimes draw the interviewee into straying from the company line just enough to learn a little something extra. In all my years of translated interviews, though, I've never known such a thing to be possible – every time I've gone off-menu with a Japanese developer, I've been shut down by the stock 'Please look forward to more information' line, and I know I'm not alone.

Information just seems to be that much more guarded in this market, but it's hard to tell where the line actually falls. When I speak to Molyneux, Levine or whoever, they don't write down their answers and hand them to a third party to read out – what I get is a direct quote. In a translated interview, a hard-line interpreter working for the publisher could take a verbal red pen to answers before I even get them. While my Japanese is awful at best, I've been in a few such interviews where the subject has mentioned game titles and other developers, yet these are omitted from the translated response. In this headline-centric industry, the translator has perhaps the most important job in the whole process and whether through inexperience, agenda or simple misunderstanding, they have the power to shape stories.

And even when they're absolutely on point, there's still room for things to go awry – colloquial expressions or misheard phrases can twist responses after they've been pulled through the translation mill. *SoulCalibur: Lost Swords* producer Masaaki Hoshino clearly wouldn't have said that his team was making a 'pay-to-win' game, for instance, nor From Software that *Dark Souls II* would be easier, but those may just have been the closest English phrases the interpreters could come up with on the spot, no doubt to the delight of the interviewers.

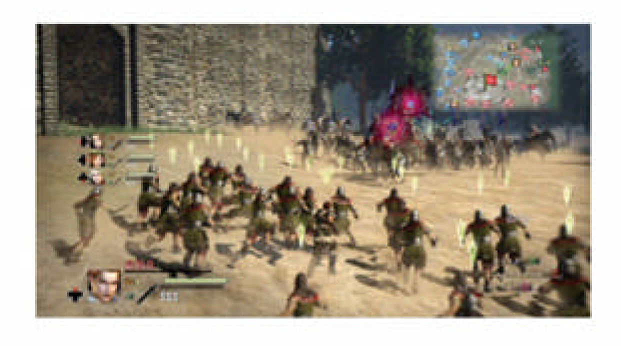
> A hard-line interpreter working for the publisher could take a verbal red pen to answers before I even get them.

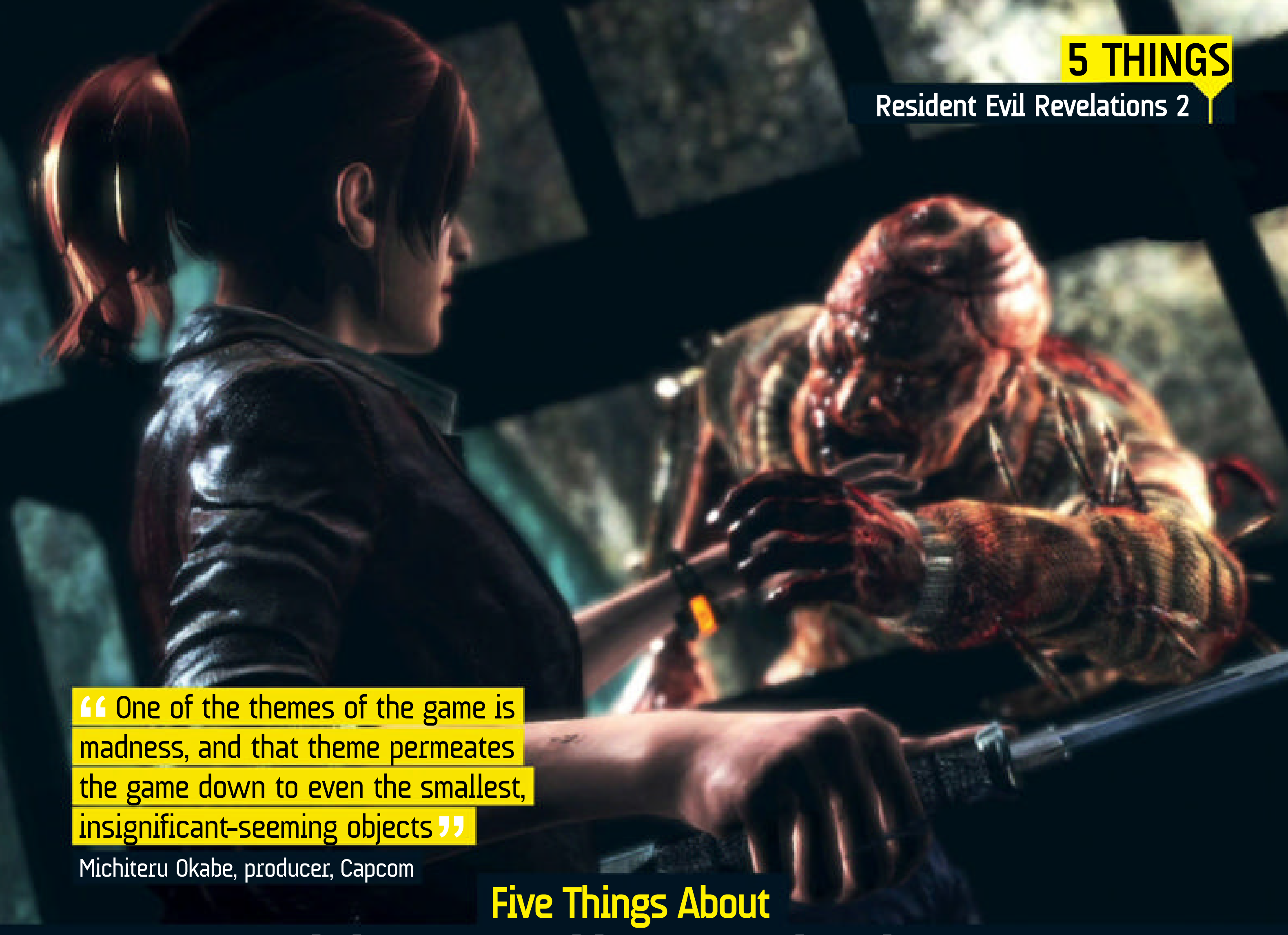
It's also worth bearing in mind that games media is nowhere near as busy or competitive in Japan as in the West. It's pretty much Famitsu and a few key sites whereas over here, it's a mess of sites, channels and blogs all looking for the big scoop that will bump them a rung or two higher on the pecking order – it's unlikely that either the developers themselves or translation staff are used to dealing with more pressing, aggressive lines of questioning, which might just explain where the need for that stock shutdown 'please understand' first came from. As frustrating as it might be for us, though, I imagine it's a whole lot worse for the developers who find out they've accidentally just spread misinformation about the game they've been toiling over for years. No amount of 'please understand' is going to help an unfortunate translator get through *that* meeting intact.

Luke Albigés is Deputy Editor of **Play** magazine and will be revealing his exciting new project next week… in game magazines



● Combining a redone version of the original PS360 strategy twist on the Hundred Years' War with the new Nightmare scenario, where an evil Joan of Arc takes control of an army of dragons, giants and beasts, *Bladestorm: Nightmare* is a little less historically accurate but looks to be fun. We just hope the game itself has been tightened up considerably.





“One of the themes of the game is madness, and that theme permeates the game down to even the smallest, insignificant-seeming objects”
Michiteru Okabe, producer, Capcom

Five Things About

Resident Evil Revelations 2

How do you stop a haemorrhaging franchise losing any more fans? If you're Capcom, you launch a 3DS game that's actually quite far removed from the main series… but in doing so accidentally create a critically-acclaimed splinter that out performs the last few core releases of your game. The episodic *Revelations 2* looks set to follow the pattern its prequel set up – and perhaps get Capcom's flagship series back on track. We spoke to *Revelations 2*'s producer, Michiteru Okabe, about what the game is hoping to achieve…

1 It brings a few familiar faces back to the series…

“In the initial planning stages of the project, it was a very natural decision for the next main character after Jill (in *Revelations*) to be Claire. She hasn't appeared in the series for some time, and the writer, Dai Saito, is a confirmed Claire fan, so all the stars really aligned for her to make a comeback. The game also features Barry Burton, who has come to the island to rescue his daughter Moira, and Natalia, a little girl who Barry meets when he arrives on the island and joins him on his mission. There are of course more characters who come into play during the course of the storyline, so you can look forward to meeting them too!”

2 It wants to be more psychologically intense than the more recent *Resident Evil* games…

“I don't want to explain the [island] in too much detail and spoil the game for you, but the game is set somewhere unspeakable. Unimaginable acts have taken place. One of the themes of the game is madness, and that theme permeates the game down to even the smallest, insignificant-seeming objects. In the course of the storyline you will meet the Afflicted, the Rotten and the Revenant, each having a place in the setting of the game. The Afflicted represent the wildness and insanity of the island, while the Revenant, which you meet while playing as Barry, are a tough challenge even from a combat veteran like him. You'll have to work out the best strategy for taking those things down.”

3 It's learnt from the lacklustre reception of recent *Resident Evil* releases…

“With a series as long-running as *Resident Evil*, I feel it's normal that we should get some negative critical reactions sometimes. After all, players want many different things. But we are trying to take the views of the fans on board and challenging ourselves to develop games that they will love to play. We got a great reaction from many people saying that we had returned to the survival horror roots of the series [in the first *Revelations* game]. *Revelations 2* is of course based on the same concept and is therefore influenced by the first game, but really the first game showed us a new path for the whole series to go down.”

4 It builds on existing lore…

“This organisation, of which Claire is a member, was formed after the Raccoon Incident of 1998, and dedicates itself to the eradication of global bioterrorism and chemical weaponry. They carry out relief activities for victims, educational programs for the public, and whistleblowing on governments and industries with secret bioterrorism programmes. I really don't want to say too much, but I will say we aren't straying from the traditional *Resident Evil* worldview.”

5 It takes advantage of current-gen tech…

“I've definitely experienced the hard work that comes with adapting game development to each new generation of consoles. As the hardware power increases, what we can express visually gets richer. With the older generations of hardware it was almost a fun challenge to try my best to create realistic graphics on hardware that wasn't really capable of it. The new consoles allow us to use new rendering technology, and better effects, filters and shadow rendering, all of which adds up to produce more realistic graphics and a more immersive experience for players.”

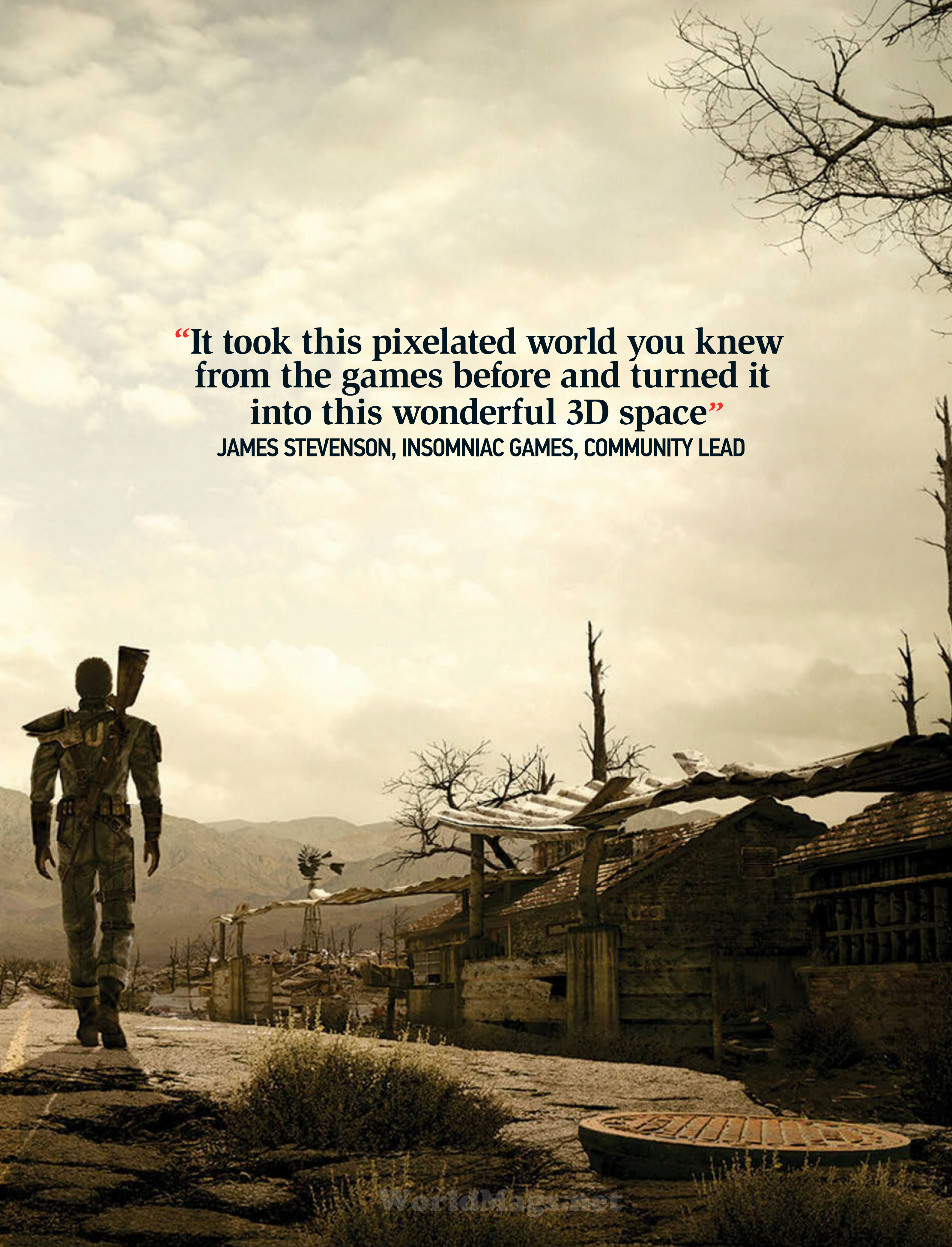


WHY I ❤... FALLOUT 3

JAMES STEVENSON, INSOMNIAC GAMES, COMMUNITY LEAD

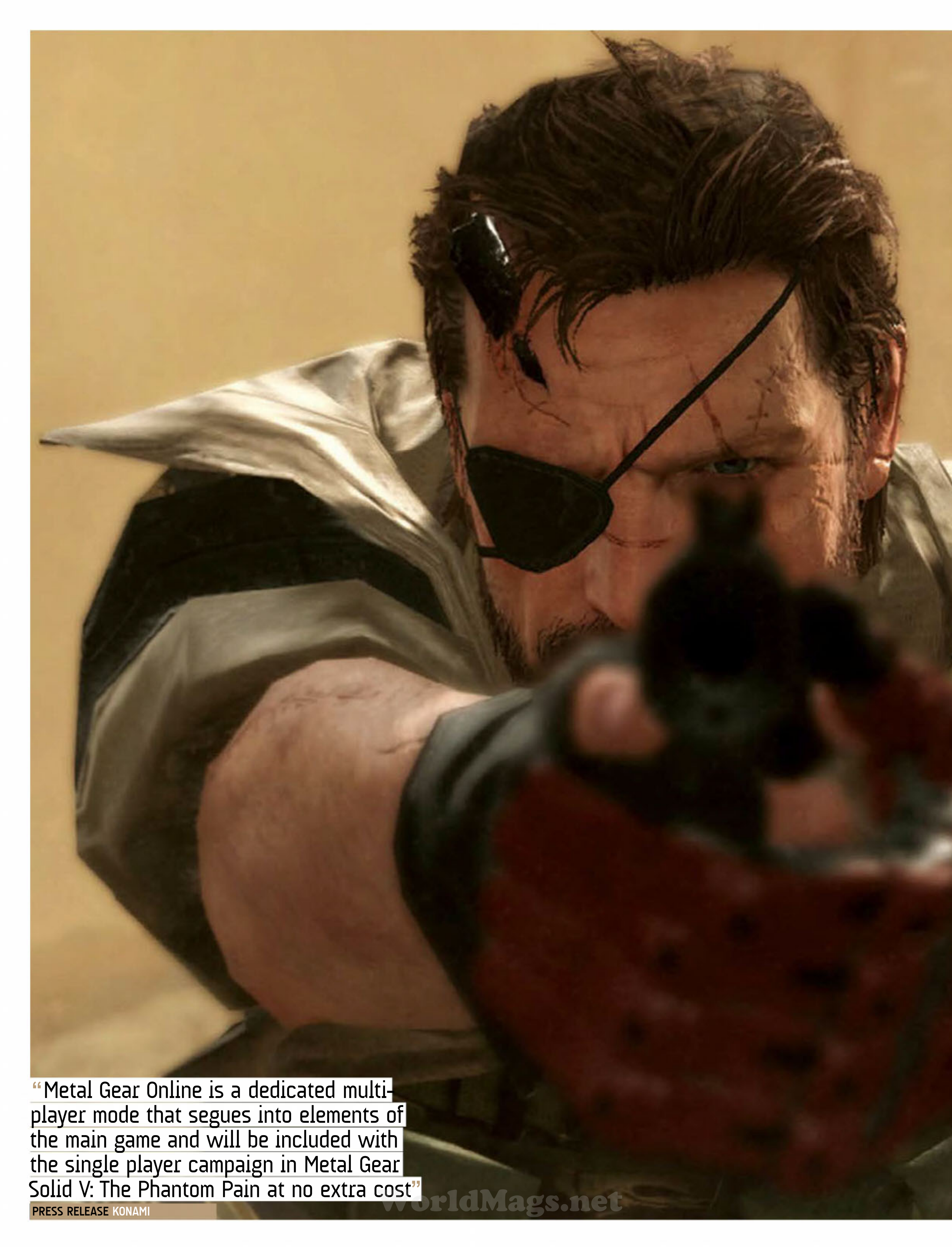
"My favourite game of the last generation was Fallout 3. *It's one of those games where the world was fully fleshed out and there were so many places to go. You know, I'm not really a big completionist – I don't have time to be a completionist – but in* Fallout 3, *I wanted to get all the weapons, I wanted to visit every nook and cranny, I wanted to discover all the little bits of environmental storytelling, I wanted to find all the bobble-heads, I wanted to power my character completely up, I wanted to do* everything. *That game made me obsessive, it caught me in a way few things had or have since. It had such good characters, such good humour, and some real bizarre side-quests. It embraced the theme of the world better than any other [post-apocalyptic game] and it never took itself too seriously. I think that's one of the things that spoke to me most about it: it nailed it in terms of where it wanted to be and ran with its art direction.*

It took a series that had been dormant for some years and made it fresh and new and relevant to some gamers, all whilst retaining that vibe that made the original games what they were. It took this pixelated world you knew from the games before and turned it into this wonderful 3D space. Of all the games I played throughout the entirety of last gen, that was the game I think I explored the most, and appreciated all the fine craftsmanship of everything on offer. Think about it – how many open world games can you say you've done that with?"



"It took this pixelated world you knew from the games before and turned it into this wonderful 3D space"

JAMES STEVENSON, INSOMNIAC GAMES, COMMUNITY LEAD



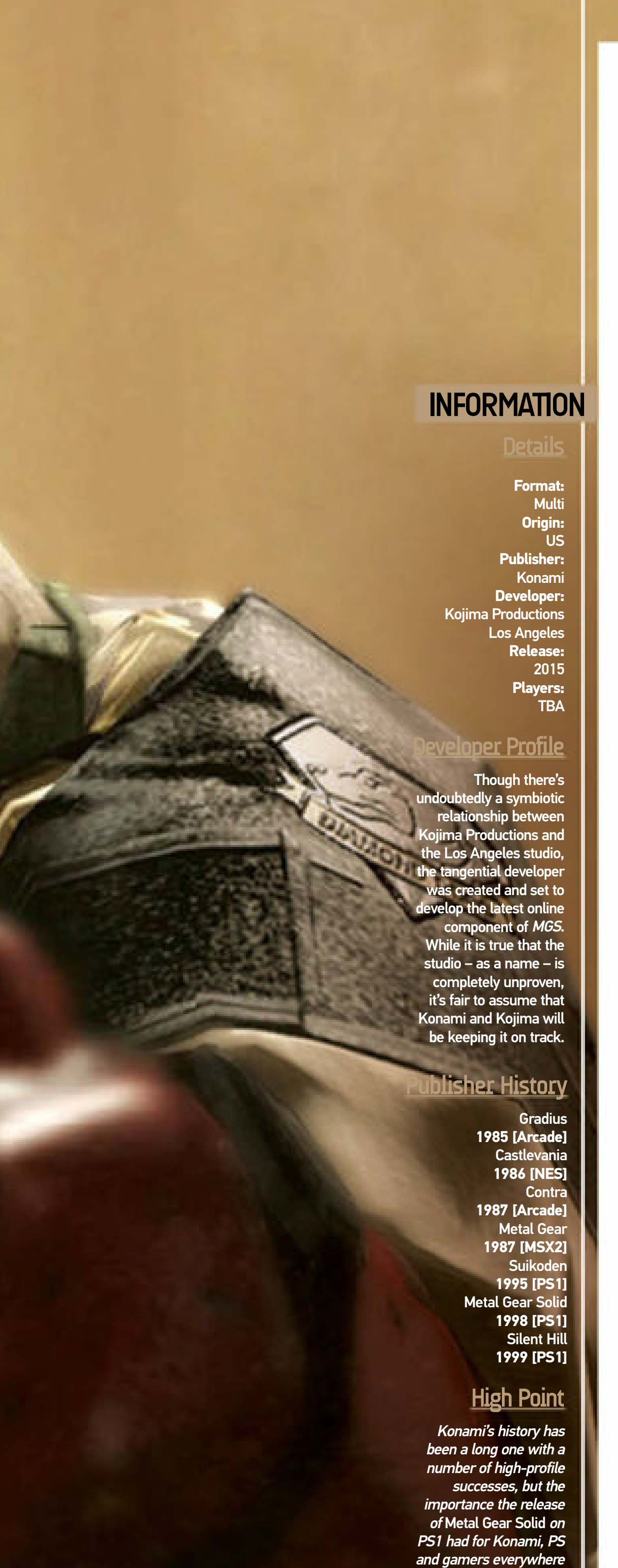
"Metal Gear Online is a dedicated multi-player mode that segues into elements of the main game and will be included with the single player campaign in Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain at no extra cost"

PRESS RELEASE KONAMI

Metal Gear Online

CONCEPT ■ The multiplayer component of *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* and the third iteration of the separate *Metal Gear Online* with all the expected additions

War, and its consumption of life, has become a well-oiled machine



INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: US
Publisher: Konami
Developer: Kojima Productions Los Angeles
Release: 2015
Players: TBA

Developer Profile

Though there's undoubtedly a symbiotic relationship between Kojima Productions and the Los Angeles studio, the tangential developer was created and set to develop the latest online component of *MGS*. While it is true that the studio – as a name – is completely unproven, it's fair to assume that Konami and Kojima will be keeping it on track.

Publisher History

Gradius
1985 [Arcade]
Castlevania
1986 [NES]
Contra
1987 [Arcade]
Metal Gear
1987 [MSX2]
Suikoden
1995 [PS1]
Metal Gear Solid
1998 [PS1]
Silent Hill
1999 [PS1]

High Point

Konami's history has been a long one with a number of high-profile successes, but the importance the release of Metal Gear Solid *on PS1 had for Konami, PS and gamers everywhere is undeniable.*

M*etal Gear Online* on PS3, for whatever reason, was an anomaly. It was a blip in the grand *MGS4* campaign, a back-of-the-box sidenote that – as compelling as it might've *sounded* – just didn't translate into much in the way of a playerbase. The foundation was there, the gameplay strong and it maintained much of the series' blend of quirky mechanics with an otherwise po-faced visage. This was only a few months after *Call Of Duty 4*, too, proving that gamers were more than willing to flock towards a single multiplayer experience if enticed.

Most likely, it was the awkward means of updating *MGO* that led to a resistance from the wider gaming community – and that's to say nothing of the misguided decision to have you create a Konami account specifically to play online. Just *trying* the online component was a rigmarole, and not even the heavy-hitting franchise could get gamers to put up with all that faff. Even in those heady days of modern gaming – as we now know it to be, anyway – we gamers weren't willing to put up with such a crippling lack of usability. It ticked along for a good few years before the servers were shut down – perhaps even longer than it had any right to, truthfully.

But with that said, those who *did* make the effort would've found something rather special; perhaps not so cliched as a diamond in the rough, but at the very least it was something original, unique and fresh. And, if nothing else, it's the kind of blemish that emboldens any developer, a scar that Konami and co will retain for its next core multiplayer outing. *This* time, it'll be perfect. Right?

/// And so in some ways it's sort of a fresh start. *Metal Gear Online* will be the multiplayer offering for *Phantom Pain*, and it'll be bundled in for free on the disc. It's interesting that Konami was certain to emphasise that point, since the PS3's *MGO* did work on a series of unlocks and purchases – and this was way before the microtransaction craze had really taken root. Exact details such as player count, mode types and so on have not yet been confirmed, but that gorgeous FOX Engine is really being put to good use.

Where previously *MGO* had very strict spaces – many of which were just dusty, compact Middle Eastern alleyways – this latest is to allow for a greater amount of freedom. No doubt the likes of team deathmatch et al will make an appearance, but this new *Metal Gear Online* will revolve around a sense of attacking and defending. Not exactly brand new, admittedly, but for a series built on a central, personal approach to play it's this design that will dramatically affect the way the game's played.

If, for example, the defending team is holed up in an outpost then your job isn't simply to head over a ridge, gun down a few enemy soldiers and call in a killstreak; here you'll need to be a little more thoughtful, considered, smart. Stealth will obviously play a large part in that, and that is a victory in and of itself – it's a sorely underserved aspect in a world of copy-and-paste multiplayer shooters. *The Last Of Us* has shown that quiet multiplayer can be as intense, as compelling – if not more so – than the brazen *Call Of Duty*s of the world. But then comes the strategy: how will you not only infiltrate that base, but incapacitate those within? You won't be alone, obviously, which makes the idea all the more thrilling.

There's the expected fear that the random, unthinking Internet might not always agree with your way of playing, and all those clever plans might not actually – if ever – work as planned without a coordinated attack among your party chat friends. But then that's where the beauty of such a system comes in; those gun-toting heathens are the distraction, while you slip in underneath a cardboard box, popping tranquilisers into necks. Both the potential for exacting methodical plans and capitalising on the noise that is online gamers is huge, and offers up a whole new way of thinking – it's not just questioning your enemy,

but now it's a case of also asking 'what will my allies do?' and strategising accordingly.

With the FOX Engine, though, the environments are going to be much more expansive, both physically and – as a result – in terms of the *ways* you can play. There are mountable, moveable, bipedal turrets, for example, which makes them viable as both an offensive and defensive option. In fact, the plethora of gadgets and tools you'll make use of add that greater level of depth to it, and it's all done in a way that is oh-so-*Metal Gear*.

For every tranquiliser gun and pair of binoculars there's an equally ridiculous opposite. Deployable cannons that use Fulton recovery balloons are just one such item, which assails any would-be attackers and causes them to drift off into the sky should an ally not come to their rescue and pop that balloon first. Or stuffed toy dogs whose inescapable cuteness causes a player to become irretrievably distracted, in much the way magazines would work. Or a short-range teleportation device, seemingly used to avoid gunfire, wreak confusion or bypass obstacles.

Then there's the usual array of stealth suits and ghillie attire, sensor grenades and – of course – cardboard boxes. It all plays into that offence/defence system, and though we don't yet know all the paraphernalia that will feature in *MGO* it's a great way of prioritising a sense of personality with everything.

In much the same way that *The Last Of Us'* multiplayer matches begin with a sense of uneasiness and apprehension, *Metal Gear Online*'s calm before the storm looks to enable a similar feeling of keenness. There's to be an escalation of sorts to *MGO*'s games: the setup, the prep, the action, the reaction. Defence will need to quickly cobble together it's first line of gadgets, the warning shots that will act as signals *and* deterrents. Attackers, however, will need recon – to know what they're up against and how best to go up against it. If done well, if done *properly*, then there could be a great deal of strategy and counter-strategy involved in devising plans, the sort of round-based tactics that will vary with each new game – hopefully keeping *MGO* continually fresh, where other shooters prefer to stay in their ruts.

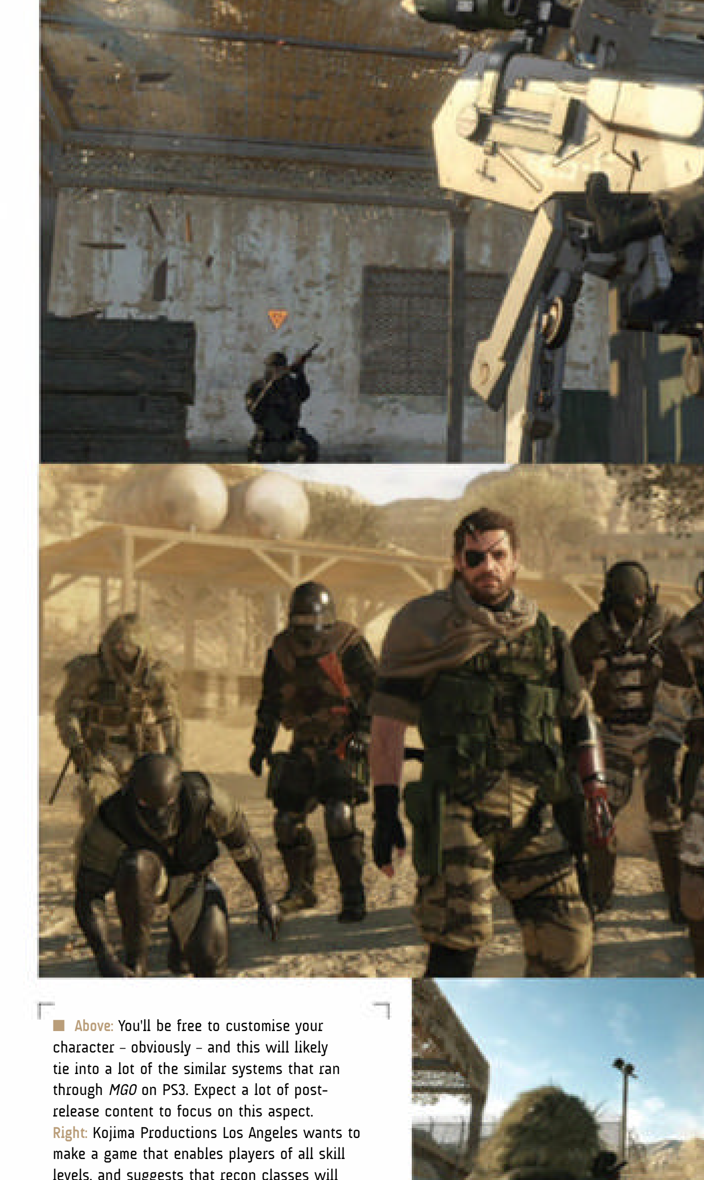
/// The class-based mechanic that underpins all this adds that extra level of input from the player, enabling you to choose your style – stealth, sniper, reconnaissance or the brash type with an AK-47. Hopefully this will mean loadouts, changeable on the fly to suit the nature of the round you're playing, to counter your enemy's picks or complement your own team's. Best of all is that Snake, Ocelot and other franchise favourites will make appearances in the multiplayer mode, though it hasn't yet been detailed quite how all this will work.

The excellent Sneaking Missions will be returning too, whereby one player would play as Snake, skills with stealth and all, versus a larger team of militia – but with the addition of extra characters it's likely that this feature won't be constrained to a single mode. Perhaps a *Star Wars: Battlefront II*-style hero mode, with brief stints of power as a reward for being the best player? We can only imagine. There are still a lot of questions to be answered with *Metal Gear Online*, but already it's looking to shake up multiplayer gaming, even if just a little bit.

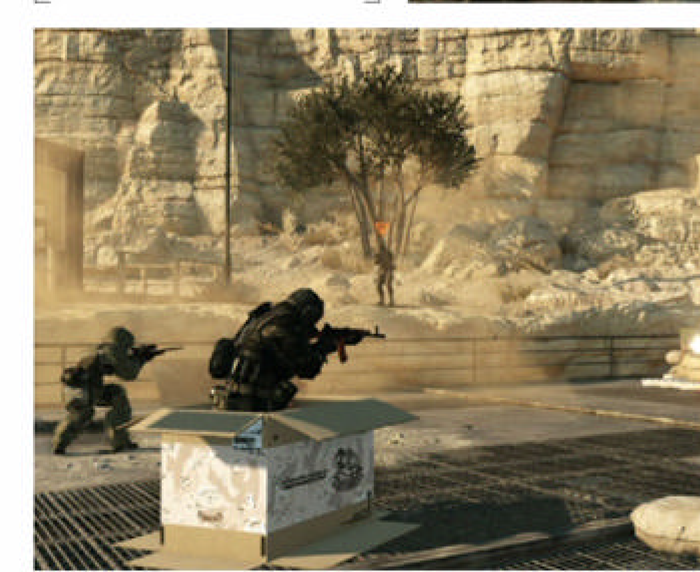
Ultimately there's a sense of 'games as services' about this side of *Phantom Pain*, too. The *MGO* we get on launch almost certainly won't be the one we're left with, and if Konami can build upon the systems and the features over the months and years after its release then we could be looking at something a little more permanent than its PS3 equal. As the sun seems to be setting on the age of *Call Of Duty*, it's games like *Metal Gear Online* that are – or, at least, could be – paving the way for new ways of thinking and playing.

This more directly competitive experience combined with the 'game invasion' of Mother Base attacks is giving *The Phantom Pain* some interesting multiplayer options for players to explore. If nothing else, it'll be fun to once again outwit other players rather than simply outmanoeuvre them. There was an exhilaration to utilising cardboard boxes in the PS3's *MGO* to surprise a human player, catch them off guard and easily send them to sleep with a tranquilising dart. If Konami can at least make that sensation feel as empowering as it was previously then it's already half of the way towards making *Metal Gear Online* a standout multiplayer experience for this generation.

> "With a focus on Tactical Team Operations, the game features a 'class system' that more uniquely defines the strengths and abilities of player characters on the battlefield"
> PRESS RELEASE KONAMI



Above: You'll be free to customise your character – obviously – and this will likely tie into a lot of the similar systems that ran through *MGO* on PS3. Expect a lot of post-release content to focus on this aspect.
Right: Kojima Productions Los Angeles wants to make a game that enables players of all skill levels, and suggests that recon classes will enable lower-skilled players to still participate with their team, providing all-important details on the enemy.



Above: Think you'll never fall for a simple cardboard box? They'll be so pervasive throughout each map that you'll often overlook the simple trap.

WEATHER THE WEATHER

ONE OF THE back-of-the-box features of *Phantom Pain* is the dynamic, unpredictable weather. This, too, will be a feature of its online component, with the likes of sudden sandstorms occurring on a whim, masking the assault from attackers but making it tougher to find objectives, or even safety. It's not yet clear quite how this effect will happen – hopefully it'll be used sparingly, to make it more special when it does occur – but it will make for some variety if nothing else. The environments themselves won't be part of the open world, and instead will be sectioned off as separate maps, so elements like this could likely change on a map-by-map basis. Done well, it could enable another sense of strategy and avoid ending up an irritant.





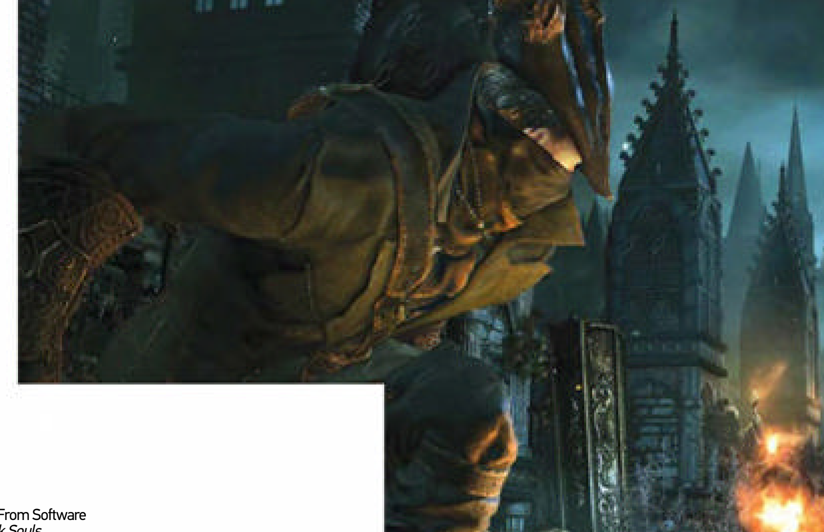
■ Left: It's already been suggested that a selfie camera will be included, for ultimate bragging rights. Below: The idea of setting up your defences and traps adds an element of precognitive preparation to multiplayer gaming that is rarely seen outside of loadout choices. Hopefully it turns out to be as strategic as it sounds.





SINGLE-PLAYER SYNERGY

WE'VE BEEN TOLD that your actions inside the multiplayer element of the game will have some knock-on effect in your single player campaign. In all likelihood, this will simply be a matter of collecting resources for your Mother Base, perhaps even earning exclusive defence objects and tools. But don't worry – Konami hasn't said much but it has set out to confirm that it won't force players to play *MGO*: the content will be optional, but it will also be superfluous. If you think of something similar to *Mass Effect 3*s multiplayer and the impact that it has on the game's campaign, you're probably on the right track. We'll be breaking news as we hear it.



Bloodborne

CONCEPT ■ A PS4 exclusive action-game being developed by From Software that could loosely be described as a faster paced *Dark Souls*

A demon's soul-mate?

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: Japan
Publisher: SCE
Developer: From Software
Release: 27 March
Players: 1-3

Developer Profile

Bloodborne director Hidetaka Miyazaki cut his teeth on the *Armoured Core* series before moving on to create the games for which is now famed – *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*. The success of the latter gave developer From Software a level of attention outside of Japan that's unprecedented in its history.

Developer History

Armoured Core 4
2007 [PS3, Xbox 360]
Demon's Souls
2010 [PS3]
Dark Souls
2011 [PS3, Xbox 360]
Dark Souls II
2014 [PS3, Xbox 360, PC]

High Point

Though some fans still argue that *Demon's Souls* is the best game Miyazaki has made, the surprising success and universal acclaim *Dark Souls* received makes it his greatest moment.

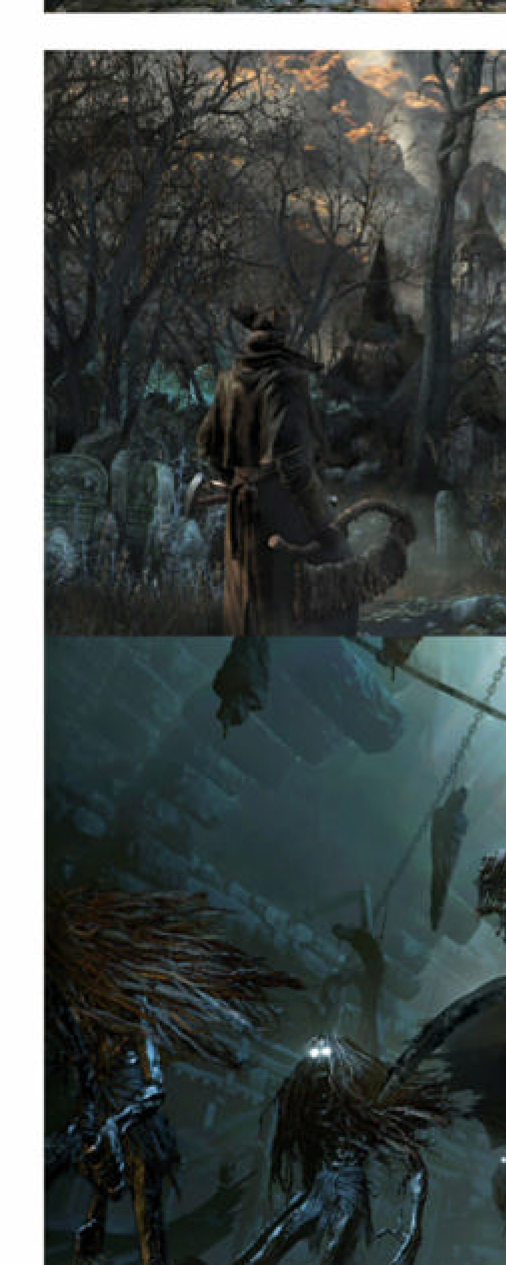
The temptation with *Bloodborne* is to treat it as another *Souls* game, in spirit, if not in name. According to director, Hidetaka Miyazaki, doing that would be a mistake. "I knew it was not going to be a *Souls* game right from the beginning," Miyazaki tells us. "Initial conversations with SCE were based on creating a brand new game on a new hardware regardless of *Demon's Souls*," he says, referring to the last PlayStation exclusive made by From Software. "We have never treated it as a sequel of any kind."

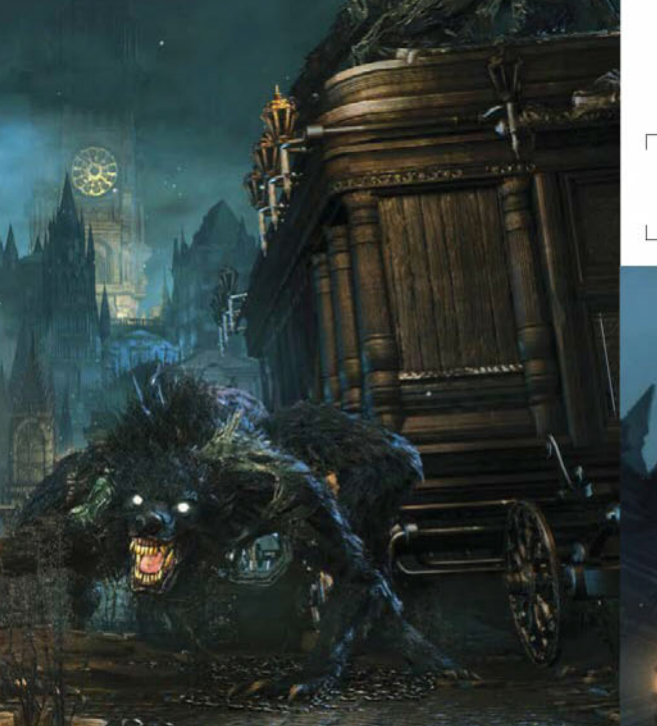
Indeed, while a very cursory look at Bloodborne's gameplay might not make it look a world away from what we've seen in *Demon's* and *Dark Souls*, it doesn't take long to start seeing some key differences as to how *Bloodborne* plays. While the game isn't quite straying into the territory of a *DMC* or *Bayonetta*, it's clear nonetheless that combat is more action-based, From Software evidently wanting you to play the game in a far more aggressive manner than may have been the case in their recent output. As such, forget about using a shield and keeping your opponent at bay with a cautious approach as you may have done in *Dark Souls*. *Bloodborne* takes that option away, forcing you to master dodges and rolls, as if the game wants you to fight like Muhammad Ali in his pomp, ducking and weaving without his gloves up before knocking his opponent down.

/// Pushing players to treat *Bloodborne* as "a more combat-focused game", in Miyazaki's own words, is a mechanic whereby you are able to win back health from enemies if you retaliate within a timeframe. This is transparently a way to keep the pace of *Bloodborne*'s combat high, pushing players to maintain a terrier-like intensity in pursuit of foes. While the daring will be rewarded by *Bloodborne*'s combat system, you will still be punished if you try to win health back when you shouldn't. This is still a From Software game. Nevertheless, the implementation of such a risk/reward mechanic not only adds a new dimension to the style of combat that's come to be associated with the developer, but serves as an emblem of the more braggadocious approach *Bloodborne* wants its players to take.

"Some of the things which stand out for me personally are the use of transforming weapons and firearms which could not be introduced in a fantasy setting such as *Demon's Souls*," says Miyazaki, as we further inquire about how *Bloodborne* differs from the *Souls* games. The introduction of firearms is perhaps the most eye-catching change and something that gave some *Souls* fans cause for concern when *Bloodborne* was first unveiled. We need fear not, however, because *Bloodborne* is certainly not a shooter. Rather, think of firearms as a tool to parry enemy attacks at close range. In that sense, guns fit perfectly into the more direct approach to combat *Bloodborne* seeks to foster, rather than being a means of allowing you to keep your distance, as you might expect. Guns become a tool for you to master to allow you stand toe to toe with enemies, interrupting their attacks and punishing them as severely as they will you if you time attacks poorly. As to Miyazaki's mention of transforming weapons, that is an intriguing element, again evocative of action games like the *Devil May Cry* series and certainly different to what we've seen in the *Souls* games. Being able to, for example, extend the range of your weapon mid-combat, gives you a means to switch between different approaches on

> "This game will transport players to a dark and terror-filled gothic world, a world full of deranged beings"
>
> MASAAKI YAMAGIWA JAPAN STUDIO



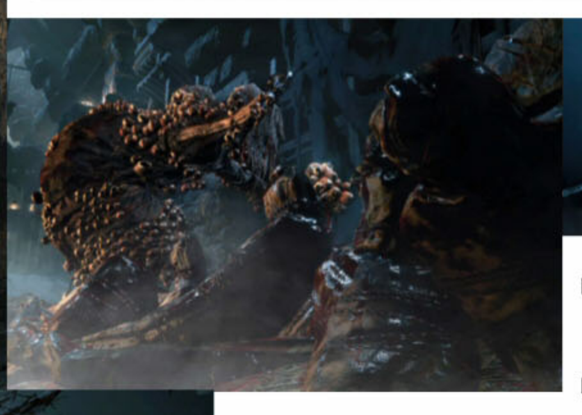


■ Below: The spine-tingling roars we've heard resonating throughout Yharnam's streets suggest sound design will be a strength of *Bloodborne*.

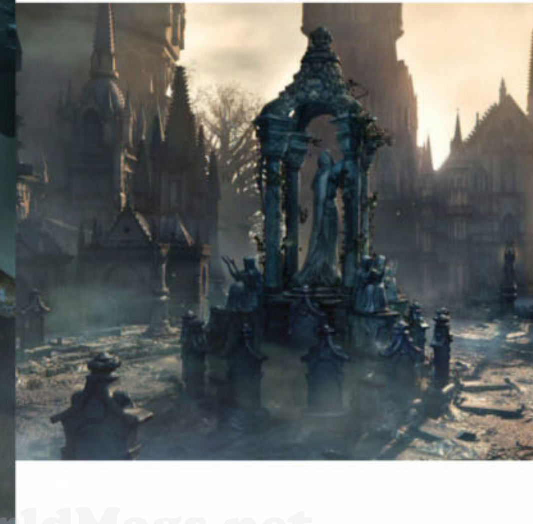


THE HOLY GRAIL

FROM SOFTWARE IS conscious of the fact that the community that formed around the sharing of knowledge and tactics about *Dark Souls* was one of the keys to its success. With *Bloodborne*, it has conceived of a means to ensure that this process of knowledge-sharing lasts longer: Chalice Dungeons. These dungeons will be unique every time, with enemy and trap placement varying for every player. A great way of providing replay value in itself, Chalice Dungeons are also intended to serve as a way of keeping the *Bloodborne* community strong. You are able to share your Chalice Dungeons with other players, with From Software hoping the tendency to share tactics will be fostered as players collaborate on the best way to tackle these tough challenges.



■ Left: This monstrosity hints at what we've got to look forward to when it comes to *Bloodborne*'s enemy design. Just be thankful we haven't subjected you to that image of *Bloodborne*'s building-sized arachnid.



the fly (we're back to that pace being lifted again). Aside from the axe, cleaver, hammer and twinblades that we saw early on, a new weapon has recently been unveiled — a cane which can be extended into a bladed whip. It'll be interesting to see whether the arsenal continues to increase significantly, or if From Software keeps it relatively limited to make balancing each weapon an easier task.

/// Despite all this talk of how *Bloodborne* is different from the *Souls* games, there remain a plethora of similarities that cannot be escaped, as much as Miyazaki might talk about the game being something entirely different. One such example is the *Souls* games' propensity to brutally punish players for their mistakes. In that aspect, at least, From Software is following the same approach to challenge and failure as they have in the *Demon's* and *Dark Souls* games.

"There will not be an Easy mode," Miyazaki says definitively. "My approach to difficulty is 'coming up with a challenging difficulty that everyone is able to conquer' and it still remains so for Bloodborne," he explains. "I personally am not a 'skilful gamer', nor am I rejecting Easy mode in games, but the idea of Easy mode to appeal to more users is something I feel is not right for this game." Unquestionably, one of the things that has made the *Dark Souls* series such a surprising success is its refreshingly unforgiving approach to difficulty. In a landscape in which developers are terrified of turning players off by confronting them with failure, From Software's refusal to mollycoddle us makes their games stand out. In the context of that uncompromising approach and given that Bloodborne will seemingly push players to take a more daring and risky approach to combat, we ask Miyazaki how challenging it is to make players feel empowered.

"Not at all," says Miyazaki, arguing that, counter-intuitively, presenting the player with harsh odds is precisely what it is that can make them feel powerful. "Because death is near, and hardships exist, people will search for power and with that will gain a great sense of achievement. This is a running theme in *Bloodborne* and the other games I have made," says Miyazaki, seemingly prepared to accept that, in this aspect at least, *Bloodborne* does share some linage with the *Souls* series.

That also goes for the structure of *Bloodborne*'s world. In between *Demon's* and *Dark Souls*, From Software changed its approach substantially. The former is built around a hub where players are able to buy items, exchange souls and travel

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

BREAKING DOWN *Bloodborne*'s transforming arsenal:

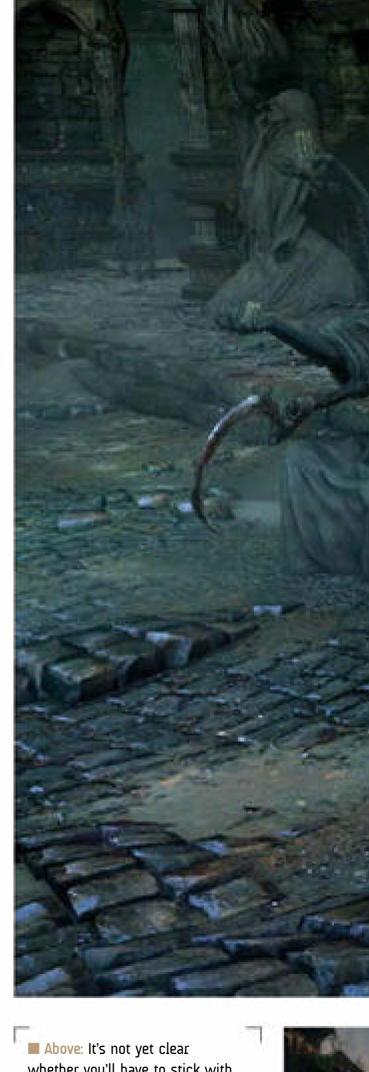
SAW CLEAVER: Pitched as a bit of an all-rounder, the Saw Cleaver is relatively quick when used in its shorter form, but can be extended at will in order to gain range at the expense of speed.

HUNTERS AXE: The Hunter's Axe also has a short and long form, though it's got a far greater range when in the latter form. The Hunter's Axe requires a more deliberate approach.

KIRKHAMMER: In one incarnation, it is a sword that can be wielded swiftly. In its second incarnation, it becomes a large hammer. In that form it can cause huge damage, but its slow speed leaves you vulnerable when you make mistakes.

TRANSFORMING CANE: We haven't been able to play with this one yet, but it's a weapon used at short range in its standard form or as a long range bladed whip.

> "Because death is near, and hardships exist, people will search for power and with that will gain a great sense of achievement"
> HIDETAKA MIYAZAKI FROM SOFTWARE





Above: This fellow, who is sporting what appears to be a rather large chaingun, is named Gyula. He has been described as a veteran hunter with incredible skill and is someone that you will bump into while roaming Yharnam.

Above: It's not yet clear whether you'll have to stick with your hunter's starting equipment or if you can change it on the fly.
Right: The additional power of the PS4 appears to have been put to good use; unless we see a radical downgrade by release day, *Bloodborne* will be by far the most visually spectacular game From Software has made.
Below: In the little From Software has shown of *Bloodborne*, it's already apparent that we'll have to deal with colossal bosses.





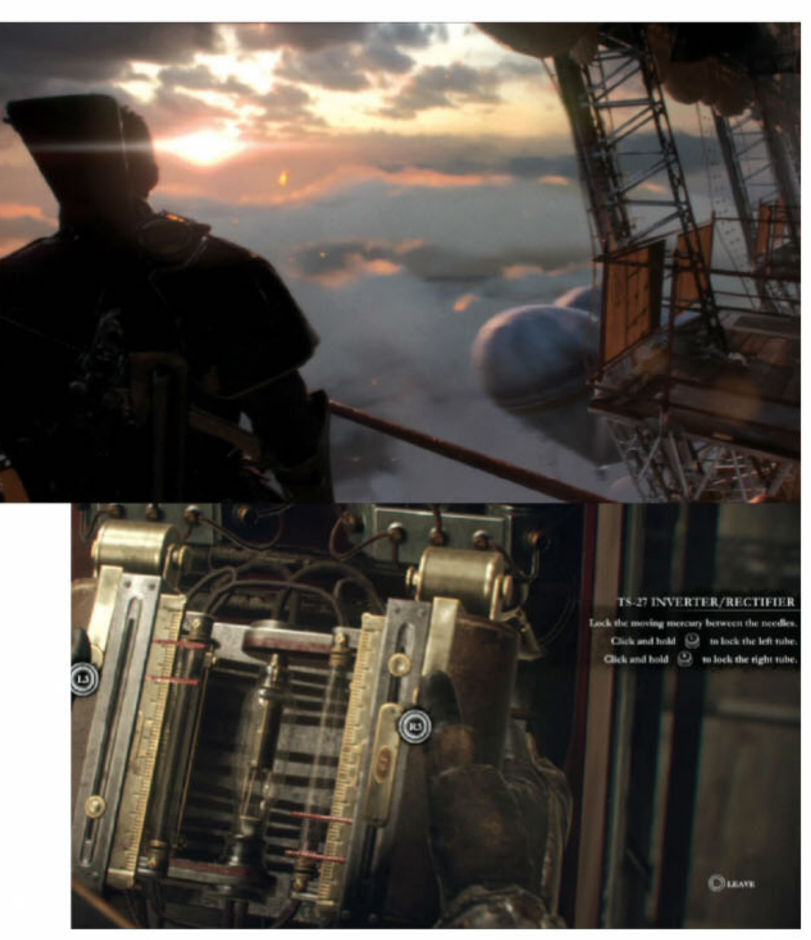
to the game's other regions. The hub was dropped in *Dark Souls* in favour of a more consistent and persistent world, necessitating a labyrinthine design that allowed players to make their way to key locations without having to travel *too* far in order to get where they needed to go. Is that a design philosophy that From Software intends to continue with in *Bloodborne*?

/// "It's almost a hybrid of the two games," Miyazaki tells us when we ask which of the two design philosophies *Bloodborne* follows. "The city of Yharnam is seamlessly intertwined and connected much like the world in *Dark Souls*," he continues. "But there is also a definite hub area, which also makes it like *Demon's Souls*."

Perhaps it is the city of Yharnam, in which *Bloodborne* is set, that best encapsulates how the game sits in relation to the *Souls* games to which it is always so inevitably compared. Miyazaki points to the visual design of Yharnam as another example of something that makes the game stand out from its predecessors. In a sense, he is right to do so. Its Victorian-gothic architecture does make it look quite different to the *Souls* games. Yet, there is an oppressive aura about the place, a darkness that is unmistakably evocative of *Demon's* and *Dark Souls*. The same goes for the monstrous denizens of Yharnam. Yes, there are enemies that look nothing like those we've seen in Miyazaki's past games, on the surface, at least. Nonetheless, their twisted design elicits the same sense of foreboding, disgust, even, and they come for you with the same hostility. In that sense, *Bloodborne*'s enemies are cut from the same cloth. What we are getting at is that, even in those aspects in which *Bloodborne* differs to From Software's previous output, the ghost of the *Souls* games is still present.

In teasing out the similarities and differences between *Bloodborne* and Miyazaki's past games, the point is not to determine whether it is 'really' a spiritual successor to the *Souls* games or not. Rather, it is to highlight what makes the game interesting to us. On the one hand, it looks as if *Bloodborne* will retain many of the features that have made From Software's games so popular: the harsh and brutal nature of their worlds, the sense of reward that arises from overcoming their punishing difficulty, the high-risk/high-reward structure of their systems, and so on. That's a good thing, because the studio does those things so well.

In spite of those obvious continuities, though, *Bloodborne* does look as if it truly is more than 'another *Dark Souls*'. The relative speed of its combat, the more aggressive approach it asks players to take and its new systems means that it feels like a game with its own identity. A From Software game, yes, but one with a fresh enough approach that we're far more excited about playing it than we would be *Dark Souls III*.



Above: Simple puzzles require solutions to bypass locked doors and passages, although they hardly need you to have earned a PhD in Astrophysics in order to conquer them.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 4
Origin: USA
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Ready At Dawn
Release: 20 February 2015
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Most famous for its *God Of War* games on PSP, Ready At Dawn is probably the least-renowned of Sony's Californian studios, which include the likes of Naughty Dog. *The Order* is the studio's first original IP, as it's only worked on existing franchises to this point.

Tecmo History

Daxter **2006 [PSP]**
God Of War: Chains Of Olympus **2008 [PSP]**
Okami **2008 [Wii]**
God of War: Ghosts of Sparta **2010 [PSP]**

High Point

A highlight of the PSP, *Chains of Olympus* brought the *God of War* franchise to the handheld market with commendable quality.

The Order: 1886

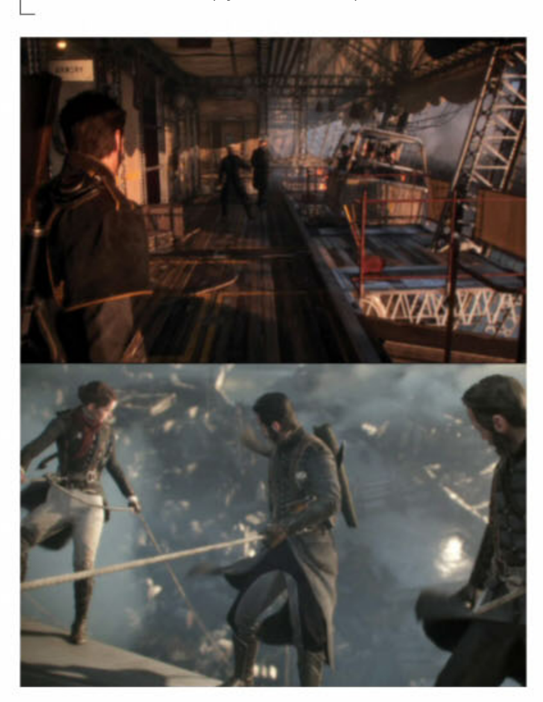
CONCEPT ■ A third-person shooter set in a steampunk vision of Victorian England

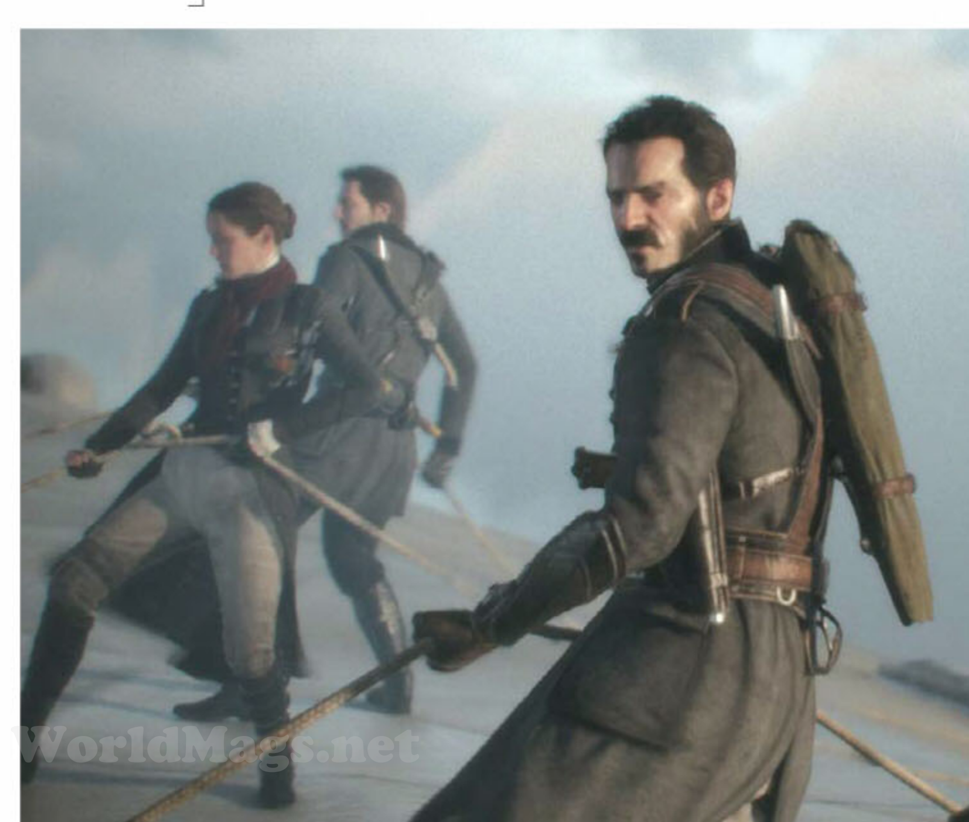
Beauty is only skin deep.

The word 'cinematic' has had an awkward relationship with videogames since it was first used as an adjective in relation to them. Any kind of videogame description that relies on language developed for another medium is doomed to failure, particularly when trying to translate it universally across both passive and interactive entertainment forms. Videogames are not movies and, therefore, can never hope to be truly 'cinematic' in the truest sense of the word

Sadly, predictably, tragically, *The Order: 1886* shows little sign of disproving this reality. By concentrating so heavily on mimicking the beats and communication techniques of film, it feels as though developer Ready At Dawn would rather be working out of Universal Studio's famed film sets than their own Californian studio. This filmic focus leaves *The Order* in something of a land of limbo; the interaction prevents it from flowing like a movie, while the fiercely unidirectional design prevents it from playing like much of a game.

Our latest demo starts enjoyably enough, though, our grey/blue-jacketed heroes abseiling down the side of a Zeppelin in what





is a visual feast of gluttonous proportions. Genuinely, the quality of the graphics is beyond reproach – this is one of the most impressive games ever conceived at a visual level, such effort presumably being the result of its cinematic ambitions.

Crucially, this abseiling moment is not a simple cut-scene. It's interactive… somewhat. Holding down on the analogue stick moves Galahad, the hero, slowly down the canvassed side of the airship. When you reach a certain point along its hull you need to press X to jump to a lower level, thereafter embarking on another session of holding the analogue stick as Galahad chats to his companions.

It's shallow, but this slight interaction does act to draw you into the world and engage you more snugly in the characters' actions. The problem is that the 'real' game is not all that much more interactive, and when it tries to be it tends to fall embarrassingly flat.

> "We don't want to recreate history with The Order, we want to twist it"
>
> **RU WEERASURIYA** READY AT DAWN

A stealth section some minutes later is so rigid that it feels as though you're playing on rails, the movements of enemies meaning 1) it's seemingly impossible to fail and 2) there's never any choice about where to move. This might not be trying to be an open-world, choice-heavy experience, but to control your every action in such a heavy-handed manner immediately makes you question what, if any, impact you're having on the onscreen events.

When you're given freer rein in a gallery shooting section later in the demo – Galahad shooting down on enemies from a balcony – the AI is currently so inept that you feel guilty for hurting them. In their current state, they have no chance whatsoever of being able to defeat anyone that's ever held a water pistol, let alone shot one.

Enemies run blindly, making them an easy target. Enemies pop out of cover and stay there for agonisingly long periods of time, making them an easy target. They can't even aim well enough to shoot you when you yourself leave the safety of cover, meaning it's okay to become an easy target yourself. The last point might be designed as some clever parody on evil movie grunts always being a terrible shot (a la James Bond), but such references don't work when you're supposed to feel challenged.

Generally this is where we'd point out that *The Order* is a work in progress and that we hope things will be different come launch day, but with launch day fast approaching there's little time left to fix things.

Despite that, we've still got out fingers crossed that our dislike of the demo was merely the result of Sony/Ready At Dawn making a bad decision in selecting which part of the game to show us. Wishful thinking, perhaps, but it would be a genuine shame to see these gorgeous visuals wasted on something so apparently superficial.

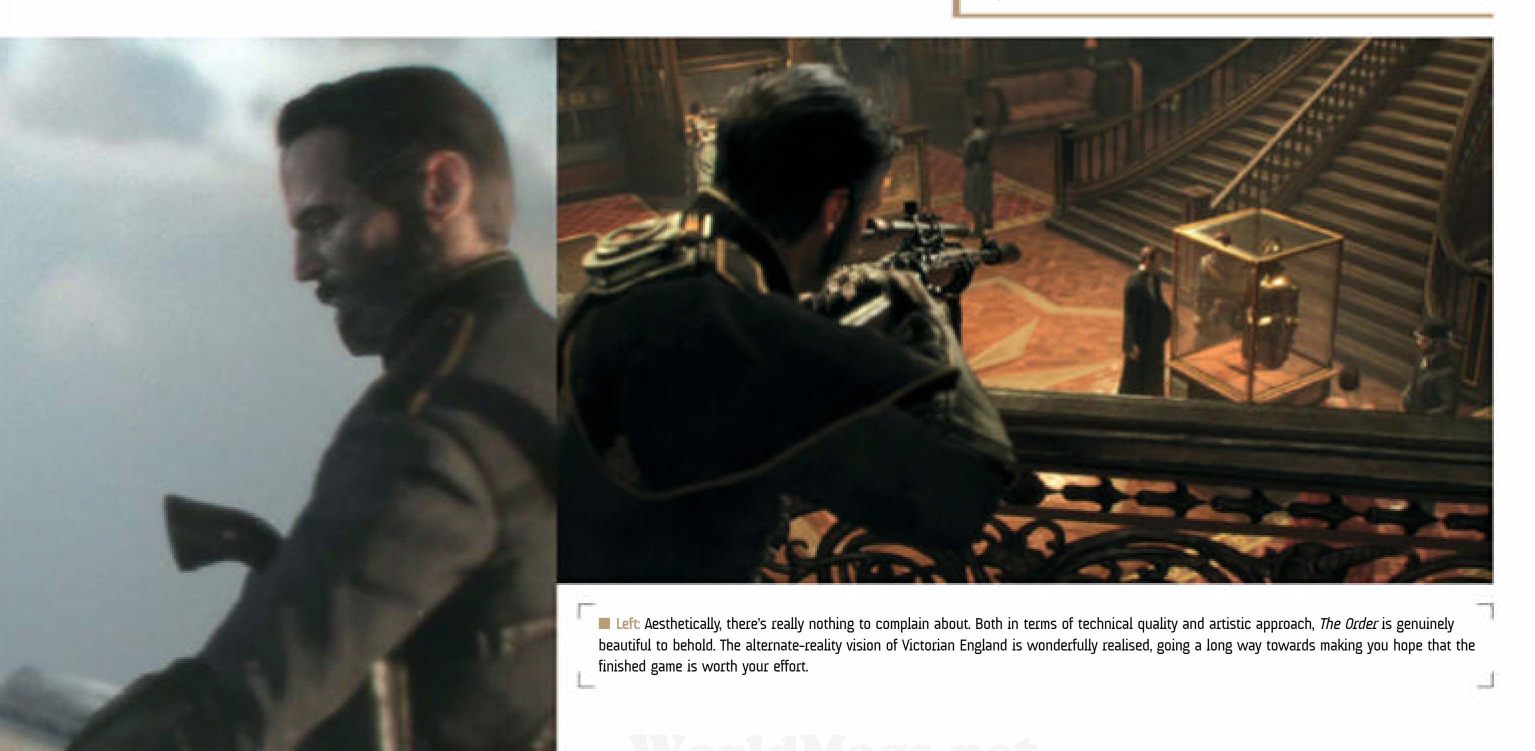
Below You may not like moustaches, but whenever the camera pans in close to a character's face you can't help but admire this kind of upper-lip hair.



ENTER STAGE LEFT, THE QTE

TIGHTLY CONTROLLED MOMENTS of melee action are common, playing out using quick-time events in which you must hit the relevant button within a short time limit. It's possible to miss a button input without failing during longer QTE scenes, the action simply playing out differently from if you'd perfected every test of your reactions.

Less welcome is the fact that stealth kills require you to engage in a short QTE. When you approach an enemy from behind, you must quickly hit the button that pops up on the screen. Failing to do so results in instant death, further cementing the fact that there really is only one way to succeed in each of *The Order*'s moments.



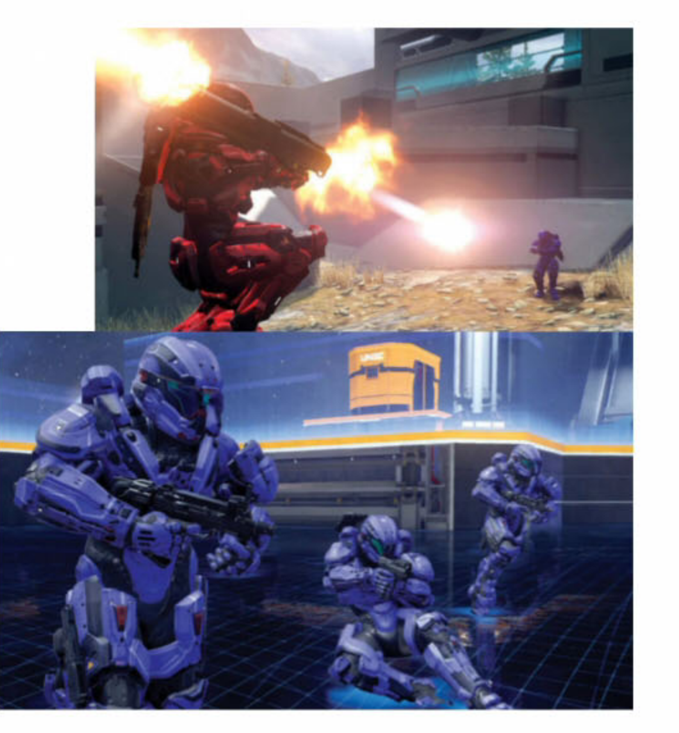
Left: Aesthetically, there's really nothing to complain about. Both in terms of technical quality and artistic approach, *The Order* is genuinely beautiful to behold. The alternate-reality vision of Victorian England is wonderfully realised, going a long way towards making you hope that the finished game is worth your effort.

Halo 5: Guardians

CONCEPT ■ 343 Industries has finally unveiled the multiplayer side of the Xbox One's most anticipated potential killer app. But is this really *Halo*?

Advanced Warfare Too

■ Above: *Halo*'s announcer now lets you know when power weapons are about to re-spawn, which always causes a brilliant frenzy in Slayer.



■ Above: Strongholds mode is a Territories-style location capture gametype, in which a team can only score if they're holding two of the three capture zones.

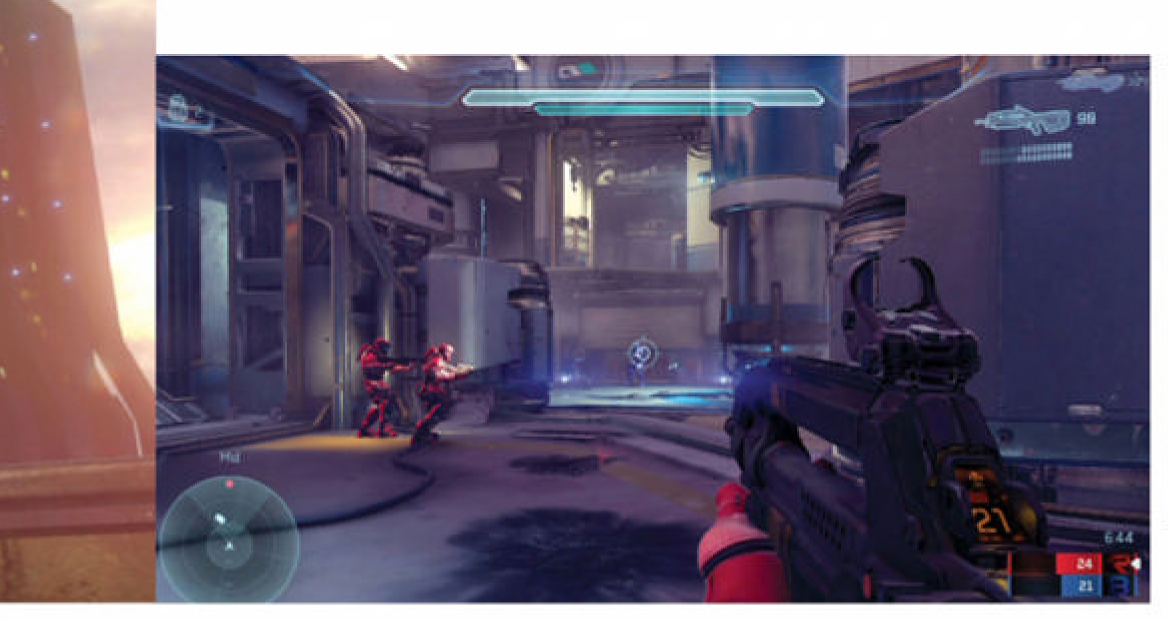
Plagued by the same assortment of frustrating matchmaking issues seen in *The Master Chief Collection*, the *Halo 5: Guardians* beta has been an exceedingly generous mess. While the regularly updated spread of options and content was greatly appreciated, the beta should have been an apology to devout fans for enduring the outright faultiness of *The Master Chief Collection*. During its first eight weeks, that game often simply did not work at all, and the *Halo 5* beta didn't work as an apology for one reason: it often didn't work either.

But the worrying frailty of its matchmaking scheme aside, *Guardians*' multiplayer feels about as slick as any game publicly presented at this stage of development ever has done. A few noticeably muddy textures aside, the game runs at a furious, shimmering clip and offers up 343 Industries' attempt to leave its own distinctive mark on the *Halo* legacy. For what it is, *Guardians* looks like it could be a rip-roaring success, but whether it actually feels like a *Halo* game is likely to be a subject of furious debate come launch.

Seemingly every FPS released in the world-beating aftermath of *Modern Warfare 2* has, at some stage of its creation, been accused of "turning into *COD*", but those well-oiled concerns really aren't unfounded here. Movement is faster, lives are shorter and grenades – a truly quintessential aspect of any memorable *Halo* bout – seem to have had their blast radius reduced and their damage expanded; making them feel like, yes, something out of *Call Of Duty*.

There is also, in 4v4 multiplayer at least, something irritatingly lunk-headed about it. Part of the beauty of *Halo* has always been its idiosyncratic and leisurely pace; pensively toing and froing around cover, waiting for the perfect opportunity to throw the perfect grenade before steaming in and clearing house. In any one of Bungie's *Halo* adventures you always felt as if you had the strength (and the toolset) to dismantle an entire team on your own if you were clever enough, but in *Halo 5* it feels like brute force is always your most valuable ally. Using your head is rarely as successful as bullying the opposition into submission as an uncompromising four-man

> "We're always thinking of new ways of telling the Halo story, whether that's in live action pieces, comics, anything"
> KIKI WOLFKILL 343 INDUSTRIES



CAN I GET A REWIND?

IF THERE IS one thing that really, truly impresses about *Halo 5* at this point, it's the near-perfect spectating system. If you see a friend playing online, at the touch of a button you can leap into their game as a spectator. The match will start afresh, and you'll watch the game from kick-off; press the skip button however, and you can jump forward to watch the bout play out closer to real time. This is the kind of feature that we all thought would be an essential part of every major triple-A release at this point in time, and even in the shaky beta, it works flawlessly. It's an exciting feature, and if it works, it could shift consoles. It's that impressive.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One
Origin: US
Publisher: Microsoft Studios
Developer: 343 Industries
Release: Q4 2015
Players: 1-16 (TBC)

Developer Profile

Formed in the aftermath of Bungie's departure from Microsoft, the Washington-based studio took its name from *Combat Evolved*'s chirpy AI droid, and has thus far been exclusively responsible for *Halo* titles.

Developer History

Halo: The Master Chief Collection
Xbox One [2014]
Halo: Spartan Assault
Multi [2013]
Halo 4
Xbox 360 [2012]
Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary
Xbox 360 [2011]

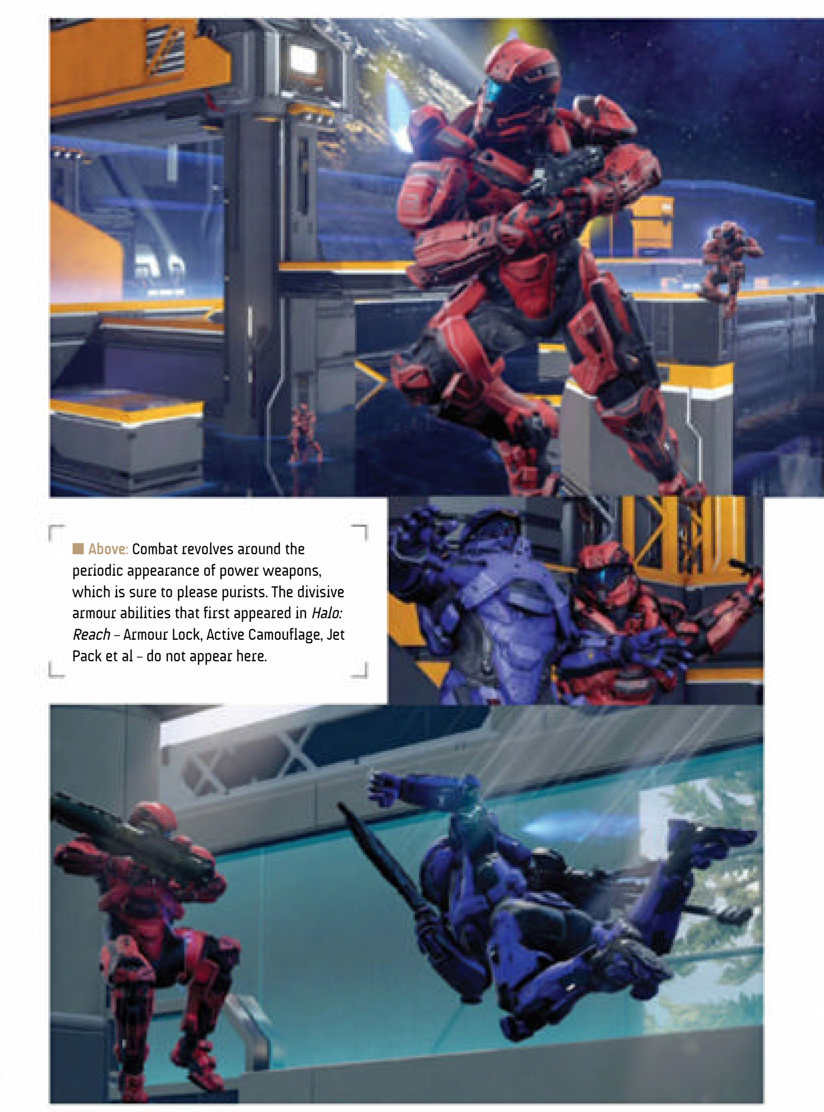
High Point

Despite sky high expectations, 343 Industries kept its cool and delivered *Halo 4* to Microsoft early and on-budget, and the finished article received extremely healthy applause from all corners.

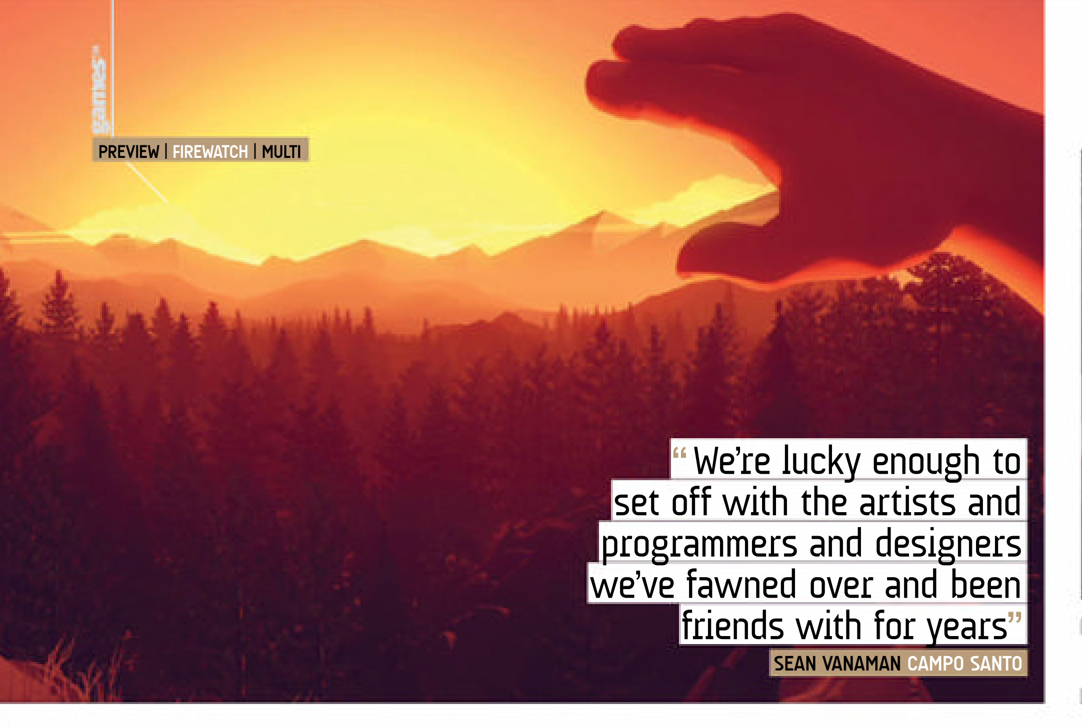
wrecking ball, and whereas running into a duo of opponents in Bungie's *Halo* often felt like the game was daring you to prevail, in *Halo 5*, two foes often feel like a threat that's near-insurmountable.

/// There are some truly terrific ideas here, though. Aiming while airborne causes you to hover in mid-air for a few seconds, which is capable of both flummoxing your opponent(s) and gifting you with a valuable impromptu vantage point if you need one. Your health meter now doesn't replenish at all while you're sprinting, which means that you're constantly trying to assess whether you should run for it, or whether your opponent actually caught the worst of your scrap and is worth pursuing. During these moments, when you're furiously trying to outthink an assailant by flip-flopping between stealth and assault, *Halo 5* really feels like the *Halo* of old. But the relentless, headlong speed of it makes for an experience that – at this point, at the very least – doesn't necessarily feel like *Halo*.

It seems fairly obvious that the new post-match celebration animations, in which jubilant Spartans laud each other with macho high-fives and backslaps, were inspired by *Grand Theft Auto V*, but they feel completely out of place here. *Halo*'s rigid sexlessness and seriousness is now, for better or for worse, a very real part of the package, and frathouse interludes have no place in the deliberately, purposefully sterile *Halo* universe. A brief post-match rah-rah may seem like the most trifling of criticisms, but it highlights a change in tack that may run deeper, and may not be entirely welcome. As brilliant as *Halo 5* sometimes feels, it also feels like *COD*. And that isn't bad. It's just a little bit boring.



Above: Combat revolves around the periodic appearance of power weapons, which is sure to please purists. The divisive armour abilities that first appeared in *Halo: Reach* – Armour Lock, Active Camouflage, Jet Pack et al – do not appear here.



"We're lucky enough to set off with the artists and programmers and designers we've fawned over and been friends with for years"
SEAN VANAMAN CAMPO SANTO



Above: Our lead character, Henry, is only a fire watchman and is therefore unarmed, so don't expect massive shootouts to play much of a role here.

Firewatch

CONCEPT Charged with watching over a Wyoming wilderness as a fire watchman, a mystery and budding radio-based relationship kick off this first-person experience

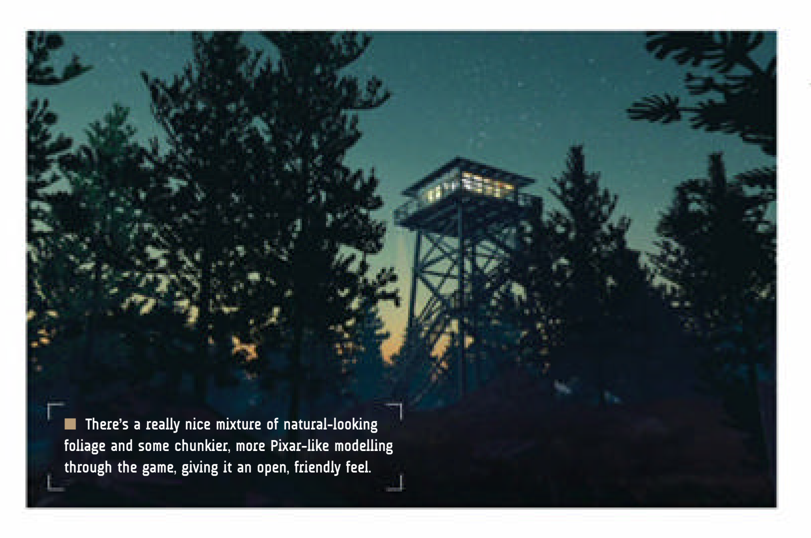
Getting back to nature

Mixing *The Walking Dead*'s relationship-focused narrative and mixing in a little *Gone Home* exploration, *Firewatch* is building the kind of subtle, evolving mystery that's bound to grab attention. This is developer Campo Santo's first game, but with a team of designers, artists and programmers with top credits from across the indie landscape, it has an impressive pedigree. With *Firewatch*, it appears to be foregoing the apocalyptic survival route that is proving both fruitful and well-trodden for other developers and giving us something new. A first-person exploration mystery set around a Wyoming forest and a watchman tasked with reporting fire during a hot, dry summer period.

The roots into Telltale's narrative style appear early with a clearly flawed protagonist in the guise of Henry. Campo Santo describes him as having a messy life, and he's turned to the isolated and quiet existence in the watch tower as a means of getting himself back on track. Trouble is he's having some personal issues with his supervisor, Delilah, who you communicate with via radio only. Your relationship with her and how you choose to interact with her promises to be a big part of the how the game progresses. Dialogue choices will play out much the same way as we've experienced with Telltale's recent games as responses carry different emotional motivations and lead to different paths opening up over time. It will also involve choices as to how much or how little you choose to reveal to Delilah at certain points of the story. Withholding information early may well lead to new revelations, keep Henry out of trouble or cause you more grief down the road.

The deeper mystery, though, involves those fires you're supposed to be looking out for and Henry venturing out of the tower and into the wilderness to find out what's happening. While most gameplay details are a little scarce, it's fair to assume from the gameplay we've seen that rock climbing and abseiling will be a big part of how you get around. These woods aren't exactly built for fast or safe travel.

And there's more out in the forest than dry grass, trees and idiots playing with fireworks. Early on you will be confronted with the possibility something more organised could be happening. *Firewatch* is an open world and you can go where you want, but the narrative is structured. You won't find things until you've unlocked the piece of information you need to move the story along. It's a fascinating and beautifully realised world that's going to be a treat to explore.



There's a really nice mixture of natural-looking foliage and some chunkier, more Pixar-like modelling through the game, giving it an open, friendly feel.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Mac, Linux
Origin: USA
Publisher: Campo Santo
Developer: In-house
Release: Q1 2015
Players: 1

Developer Profile

With developers like Sean Vanaman and Jake Rodkin who worked on The Walking Dead, Nels Anderson from Mark Of The Ninja, composer Chris Remo and artist Olly Moss, Firewatch has a who's who of Indie talent behind it. This is the first game from Campo Santo, but with a roster like this expect great things to come.

Developer History

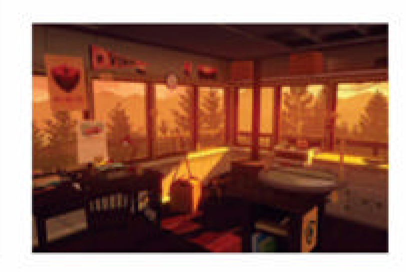
The Walking Dead
2012 [Multi]

Mark Of The Ninja
2012 [Multi]

Gone Home
2013 [PC]

High Point

Of the games these developers have worked on, *The Walking Dead* is far and away the most commercially successful and remains a high point. There's no shortage of top indie credits throughout the team though.





1 NATHAN DRAKE is reported to have over 800 facial animations in *Uncharted 4*, and his hair is powered with 'true' physics, too. There's been a notable downgrade in graphical fidelity since the game's reveal, but it still looks ace, so we can't complain...

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: USA
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Naughty Dog
Release: TBC 2015
Genre: Action-adventure
Players: 1

DEVELOPER PROFILE

Naughty Dog – who has been around for over two decades now – has become synonymous with quality: from *Crash Bandicoot* to *Jak & Daxter*, *The Last of Us* to *Uncharted*, the studio has hit upon the perfect balance of narrative mastery and functional gameplay. It is one of the most respected developers in operation today.

Franchise History

Crash Bandicoot
1996 [PlayStation]

Jack & Daxter: The Precursor
2001 [PS2]

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune
2007 [PS3]

The Last Of Us
2013 [PS3, PS4]

High Point

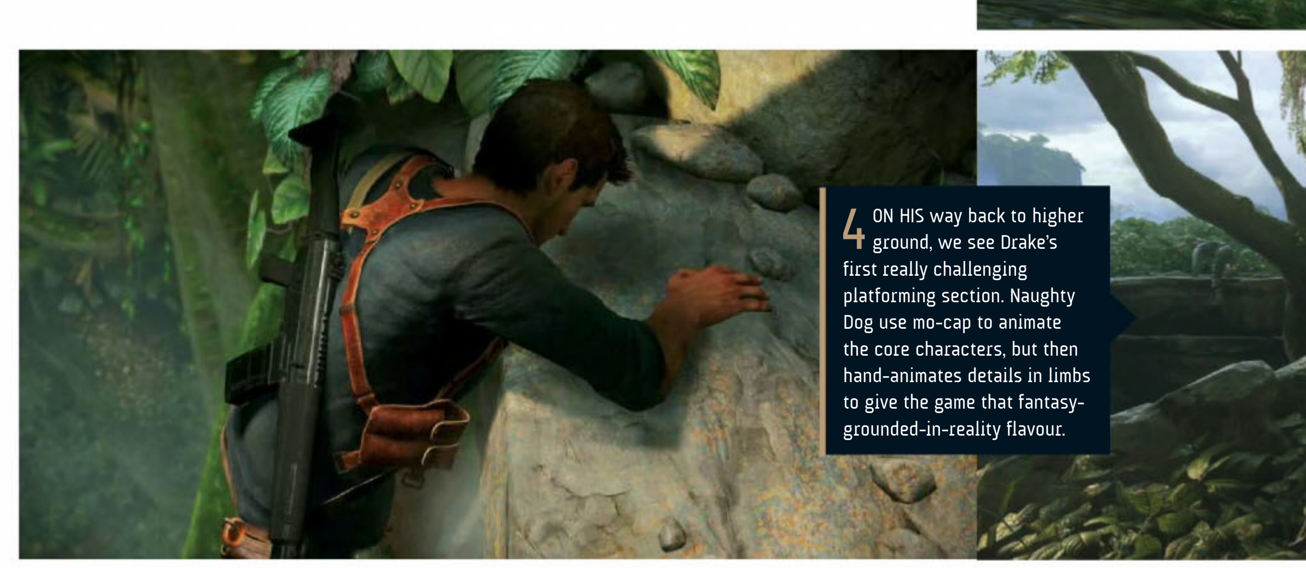
Many would consider The Last Of Us *to be Naughty Dog's highest point, but we've still got a soft spot for* Crash Bandicoot: Warped *– it's some of the best 3D platforming out there.*

Uncharted 4: A Thief's End

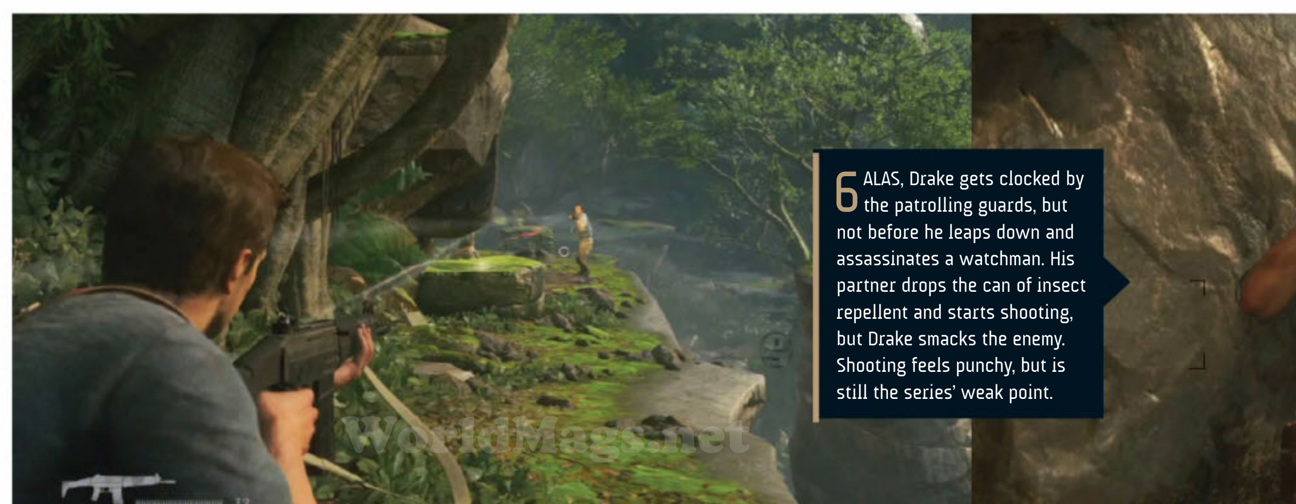
CONCEPT ■ Nathan Drake – older and more grizzled – is back on the hunt for treasure, seeking a buried cache of glimmering pirate booty in places uncharted.

The team has changed, the attention to detail has not

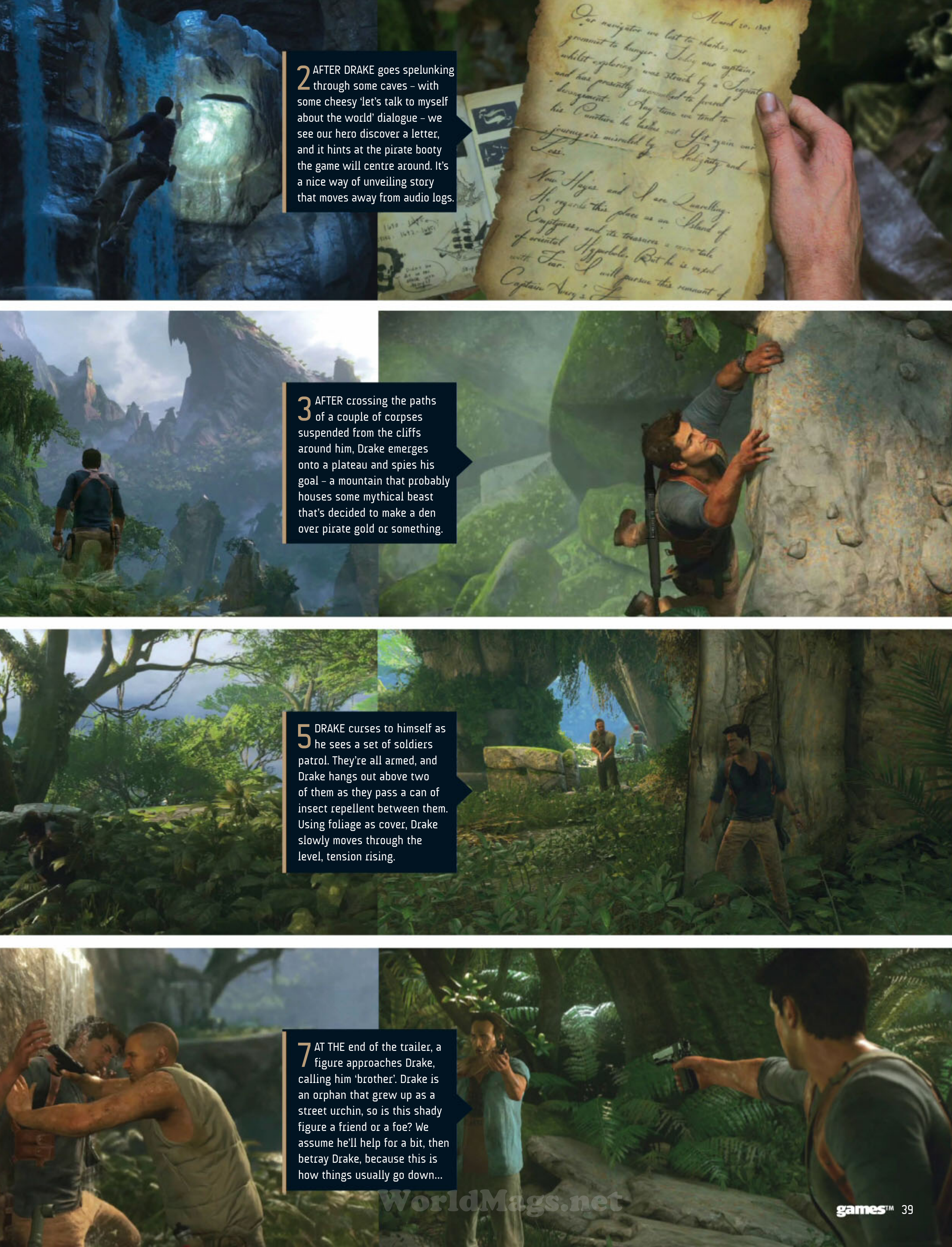
Amy Hennig – who had been the writer and creative director behind the first three *Uncharted* games – left Naughty Dog early in 2014. She was followed by Todd Stashwick, who was the game director on *Drake's Deception* and was billed to fill the same position on *A Thief's End*. This made us quite nervous about *Uncharted*'s forth outing – as much as we trust Naughty Dog, you could really feel Hennig's style spill into the game, and we worried the series might lose some of its unique narrative flavour. After seeing the game in action, though, and being treated to 15 minutes of gameplay, our fears have been allayed – the game seems to be as well-polished and well-constructed as any other Naughty Dog game, and looks to be taking huge advantage of the power on offer in the PS4. We've broken down the gameplay revealed so far to see what clues it can give us regarding the full game...



4 ON HIS way back to higher ground, we see Drake's first really challenging platforming section. Naughty Dog use mo-cap to animate the core characters, but then hand-animates details in limbs to give the game that fantasy-grounded-in-reality flavour.



6 ALAS, Drake gets clocked by the patrolling guards, but not before he leaps down and assassinates a watchman. His partner drops the can of insect repellent and starts shooting, but Drake smacks the enemy. Shooting feels punchy, but is still the series' weak point.

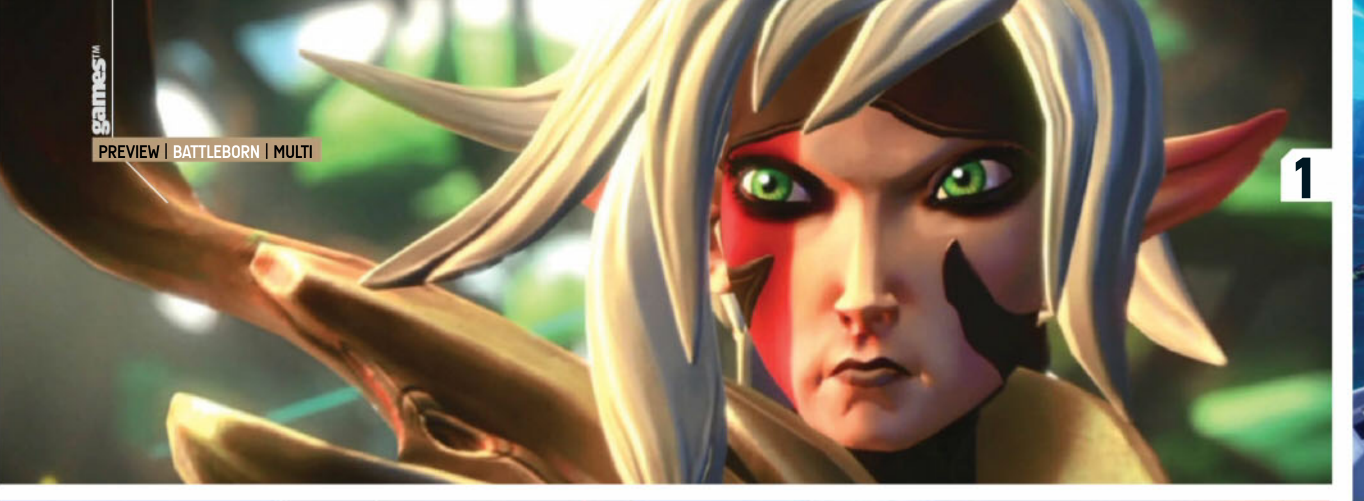


2 AFTER DRAKE goes spelunking through some caves – with some cheesy 'let's talk to myself about the world' dialogue – we see our hero discover a letter, and it hints at the pirate booty the game will centre around. It's a nice way of unveiling story that moves away from audio logs.

3 AFTER crossing the paths of a couple of corpses suspended from the cliffs around him, Drake emerges onto a plateau and spies his goal – a mountain that probably houses some mythical beast that's decided to make a den over pirate gold or something.

5 DRAKE curses to himself as he sees a set of soldiers patrol. They're all armed, and Drake hangs out above two of them as they pass a can of insect repellent between them. Using foliage as cover, Drake slowly moves through the level, tension rising.

7 AT THE end of the trailer, a figure approaches Drake, calling him 'brother'. Drake is an orphan that grew up as a street urchin, so is this shady figure a friend or a foe? We assume he'll help for a bit, then betray Drake, because this is how things usually go down…



1

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Battleborn

CONCEPT ■ *Battleborn* focuses on a huge party of heroes after they're pushed back into the universe's last remaining solar system by a bunch of time-accelerating baddies

We're not in Pandora anymore, Claptrap

When you first take a look at *Battleborn*, you'd think it was a MOBA – it's got all the hallmarks of the PC's new favorite genre, from graphics and art style to roster and character variety. The thing is, Gearbox is quietly trying to innovate the co-operative shooter, and a MOBA is probably further away from what *Battleborn* really is than the studio would like to admit. After all, MOBAs are in vogue right now, and having consumers say 'it looks like *League Of Legends*' isn't necessarily a bad thing…

But *Battleborn* is more than a MOBA – calling it such is reductive and is a disservice to Gearbox's efforts. The 2K subsidiary is known for its work on *Borderlands*, sure, but the 15-year lifespan of the developer has also seen projects like *Brothers In Arms* and *Duke Nukem* pass through, and *Battleborn* looks like some kind of vibrant chimera, fed with the offcuts and scraps on the projects that led to its creation. We've compiled the five most interesting mutations in the game so far, to try to understand what Gearbox is doing…

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Xbox One, PS4
Origin: USA
Publisher: 2K
Developer: Gearbox Software
Release: TBA 2015
Players: 5-10 (online)

Developer Profile

Gearbox has 15 years worth of developmental talent up its sleeve, and they have become a name (recently) synonymous with polished, quality products. If you ignore the existence of *Aliens: Colonial Marines*, the studio has a watertight back catalogue.

Developer History

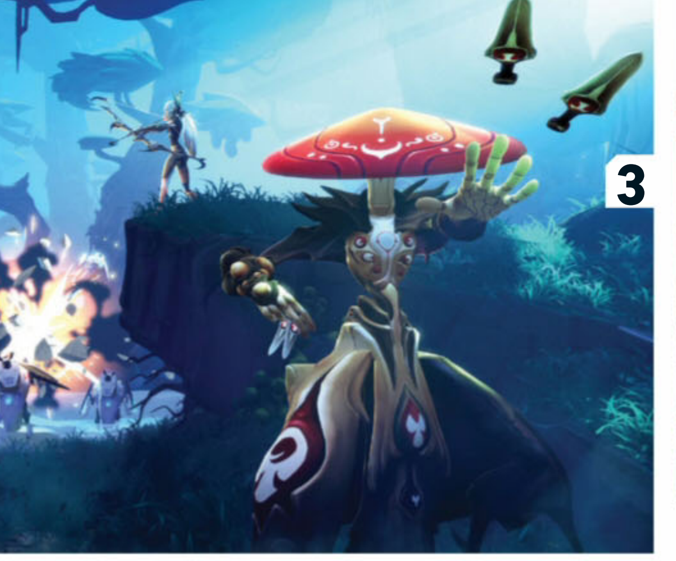
Aliens: Colonial Marines
2013 [PS3, Xbox 360, PC]
Borderlands
2009 [PS3, Xbox 360, PC] Half-Life: Blue Shift
2001 [PC, Mac, Linux]

High Point

Borderlands 2 pretty much perfected the formula that the original game had set out, combining excellent gunplay with an insanely addictive loot system and off-the-wall humour.

1 IT'S GOT BORDERLANDS' SENSE OF VARIETY…

GEARBOX TAKES pride in the way it brought the loot mechanic into the FPS, and now it plans to evolve that sense of variety by exchanging guns for characters. The studio is calling the game a 'hero-shooter', and they plan to satirise everything that the FPS genre has seen so far with its own character in *Battleborn*. Gearbox's art director Scott Kester has said he hopes 'every character in the game is the main character of a game that hasn't come out yet' – the team at Gearbox refers to the roster, jokingly, as the 'battlebarn'. This is good news for players that might have gotten tired of the few playable characters in *Borderlands*, despite the fun customisation options. Variety, as they say, is key.





5

> "As a genre-fused, hobby-grade, co-operative and competitive FPS exploding with eye-popping style and an imaginative universe, Battleborn is the most ambitious videogame that Gearbox has ever created"
>
> RANDY PITCHFORD GEARBOX

2 IT'S GOT ITS OWN DISTINCT LORE AND WORLD TO EXPLORE…

A LOT OF shooters are happy with doing little to contextualise the havoc you're wreaking (or, at least, caring so little about narrative that whatever you're doing feels acceptable). *Battleborn*, however, takes place in the future, where solar systems are going dark. One by one, the survivors are flocking to a single system in hopes of fighting off the encroaching darkness. Here, the survivors form five factions and end up fighting each other as much as the force that pursues them all. It may not be the most original story, but at least it'll make for some interesting narrative justification.

3 IT'S THE RESULT OF A WHOLE TEAM'S EXPERTISE…

THE ALIEN RACE at the heart of the universe's problems turn out to be called the Varelsi – celestial beings that have somehow crawled into our universe. The Varelsi are supposed to be the embodiment of entropy, and their sole aim is to accelerate the progression of time to prematurely bring about the end of time. It's a big story, and one that's been worked on with character designers and programmers to ensure the whole experience fits together, and that everyone on the team had the same creative goal. It's got some tough competition right now (we're looking at you, *Destiny*), but Gearbox has proven itself in genre mastery before.

4 IT'S FOR LONE WOLVES AND FOR PLAYERS WHO WANT TO PLAY CO-OP…

SOLO PLAYERS REJOICE – the game is built to support up to five players at any one time, but that doesn't mean you can't play on your own if you want to. Players can upgrade their characters from level one right the way up to the highest rank in 20 to 30 minutes if they wish – a speed intentionally chosen by Gearbox because it wants to emphasise the feeling of RPG progression you'd have gotten from *Borderlands*. It's the anti-*Destiny* of co-op FPS games, and we know how much that'll appease some of the core shooter audience. The days of the single-player campagin might be dying, but at least Gearbox is acting as a vanguard… for now.

5 IT'S BUILT FOR REPLAYABILITY…

ASIDE FROM all the different characters you can choose to level up, when you replay any given scenario, you're given the opportunity to completely remap your heroes' abilities. Complete specific objectives in-game and you will receive new upgrades and unlocks that can apply to other characters in the roster. All of that is of course in addition to the standard offering of loot available during the missions. Compounded with how short the individual scenario sessions are, these elements will hopefully lead to a completed game that doesn't just have a wide breadth of missions and characters, but also some good depth, too.

Until Dawn

CONCEPT ■ Eight teenagers decide to spend the night in a log cabin, unaware that a serial killer is hunting them down. You must make the decisions that will either save or kill them

If you go down to the woods today...

Before we begin our *Until Dawn* demo we're asked to take a quick survey. Are we more afraid of the dark or of crowds? Of suffocation or needles? Of gore or insects? The idea presumably being that the game will tailor itself to take best advantage of that which gives you nightmares. Given that different things scare different people, the attempt to reach into your soul to better send shivers down your spine represents a commendable dedication to *Until Dawn*'s cause as a horror game.

From here we're set loose partway through the plot in control of Sam, one of eight characters that you will ultimately have control over. Immediately, the slasher-movie tropes that *Until Dawn* is built upon crystallise before our eyes. She's relaxing in the kind of bath tub usually reserved for Hollywood playboys on a weekend binge in Las Vegas, headphones on and classical music belting her eardrums into early retirement. Her eyes are closed. She has absolutely zero awareness of her surroundings. She is vulnerable and doesn't realise it.

The camera pans to reveal a grotesque, masked man standing over her shoulder - holding what looks like an oxygen tank of the sort that caused so much damage in *No Country For Old Men*. He leaves, clicking the door behind him. Sam hears the click and comes to the conclusion that her friends are playing a trick on her by stealing her clothes while she bathes in middle-class luxury. Teens will be teens, she thinks.

And thus, the tension of the scene is set. Sam wanders out of the bath and around the cabin looking for which of her seven friends might have been playing voyeur, only we know that danger lurks. Like Hitchcock said, tension is always greatest when the audience knows more than the characters.

What follows is a stressful plod through the cabin, followed by the inevitable chase scene in which our masked friend chases Sam into the darker and dustier corners of the basement. During these action scenes the pace regularly slows down to force you to make key decisions. Should you hide in the shadows or bolt for the exit? Get under the bed, or jump over it and risk falling? Topple shelves to slow your pursuer down, or shoulder-barge the locked door at the end of the corridor? These decisions become more pertinent and vicious thanks to the strict countdown associated with them. If you don't make a decision quickly enough, then Sam will make it for you of her own accord – for better or worse.

Interestingly, although not surprising given Supermassive's motion control history, decisions are made by moving the PS4 pad to the left or right and pressing 'X' when your preferred option is selected on-screen. Further, some moments require you to 'keep still' - the game tracking your controller as Sam hides silently around a corner, any movement from you resulting in her capture.

And she *can* die. All eight of the characters can die. If any one of them topples over, then the story continues without them, the promise one of seamless and intelligent transition into new plot threads that take every potential lost life into account. Some players will finish the game with all eight alive, others will see a narrative that ends early due to eight deaths.

No matter what happens in your game, Supermassive is promising a story that makes sense and has a start, middle and end. It's an incredibly lofty ambition, one whose script is supposedly many orders of magnitude more complicated than those seen in the vast majority of films, TV shows or games.

> "What you do as a player impacts the outcome of every scene as it plays out in real-time"
> JEZ HARRIS SUPERMASSIVE GAMES

There are technical issues to iron out - onscreen icons look sloppy and lip-syncing is awful - but the signs are generally positive. Of all the PS4-exclusive titles due in 2015 it's *Until Dawn* that's most eye-catching in terms of originality; the act of playing feeling somewhat similar to *Beyond* and *Heavy Rain*, only with a story that promises to be far more open-ended and multifaceted.

Isolated log cabins have done wonders for cinematic horror romps featuring skimpily-dressed teenagers, so here's hoping *Until Dawn* can do similar things for the interactive realm.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 4
Origin: UK
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Supermassive Games
Release: Summer 2015
Players: 1

Developer Profile

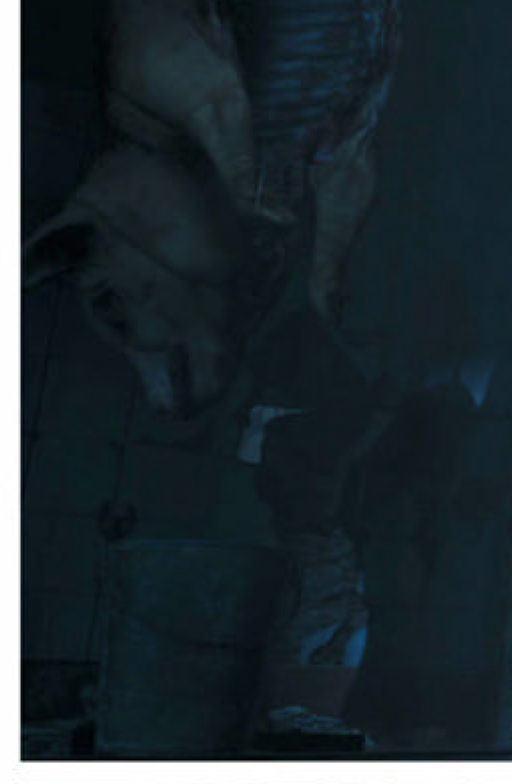
Supermassive Games has largely spent its time working on porting games to PS3 and creating augmented reality experiences for the PS Move. It first started working with Sony in 2010 with the launch of *Tumble*, a puzzle game in which you interact with the game world through the Move controller. Without question, *Until Dawn* is the studio's highest profile title to date.

Developer History

Wonderbook: Walking With Dinosaurs **2013 [PS3]**
Killzone HD **2012 [PS3]**
Doctor Who: The Eternity Clock **2012 [Multi]**
Start the Party! **2010 [PS3]**

High Point

None of Supermassive's games have been especially well received thus far, although their minor involvement in *LittleBigPlanet Vita* did earn them some plaudits.





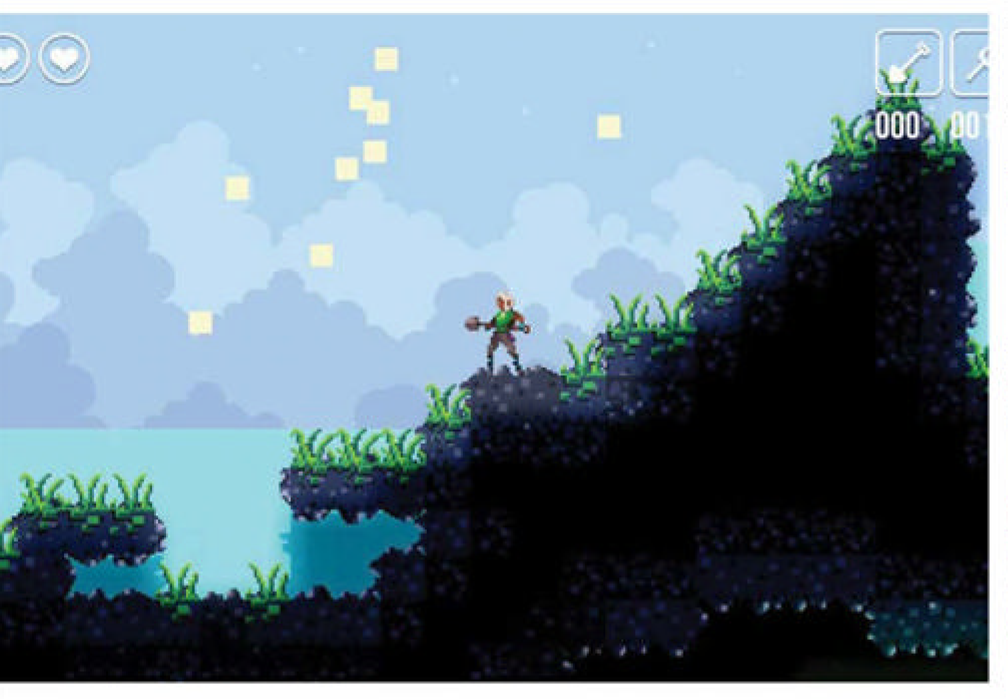
■ Above: There are no shortage of horror clichés on show; this is more in the mould of *Saw* as opposed to something a little more complex like *The Shining*.



Above: Once a character is dead, they're dead. There are no restarts, no second chances. The plot simply takes into account their demise and ploughs ahead. Below: As with any teen-slasher setup, you're going to need to suspend your disbelief to buy into a lot of the action on show here. It might be dark, but would Sam really not notice the incredibly obvious, incredibly tall, white-masked spectre standing right next to her?

TO SATIRE, OR NOT TO SATIRE?

ONE OF the issues that *Until Dawn* must face head on is how it presents its slasher movie clichés in a way that doesn't feel formulaic and/or childish. Most of its audience will have grown up a diet of *Halloween*, *Scream* and *Friday The 13th*, meaning (on the evidence of what we've played) there's little here that's genuinely new in terms of setting, character and plot. By taking itself too seriously it risks alienating an audience that understands that this genre's tropes are not meant to be considered high-art or high-brow storytelling. However, *Until Dawn* does seem to take itself very seriously. Supermassive would do well to remember that most slasher movies are a satire on something else entirely.



Left: With minimal UI elements and only vital information being shown on-screen, more space can be dedicated to *Skytorn*'s gorgeous pixel-art environments. Below: *Towerfall*'s level design was immaculate, and the fact the designer is attached to *Skytorn* excites us greatly.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Mac, PS4
Origin: USA
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Noel Barry, Mat Thorson, Alec Holowka, Pedro Medeiros
Release: TBC
Genre: Side-scrolling action platformer
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Rather than a specific studio, *Skytorn* comes from the creative efforts of Noel Barry – a Canadian indie developer that works in Vancouver's IndieHouse: a place that's given birth to the games *Towerfall Ascension* and *Night In The Woods*. The artists, programmers and musicians that live in the house all chip in and help on each other's projects, too, bringing a variety of expertise and skillsets to the fore between their myriad games.

Skytorn

CONCEPT A decaying sky world is under attack from violent entities. Set forth with your shovel and dispatch them, and you might just find some cool stuff en route…

Looting in the sky with diamonds

Our favourite part of the *Sonic The Hedgehog* games was always the Sky Sanctuary level – the decaying ruins suspended in the sky always felt constructed with this tragic, yet beautiful, ambition. *Skytorn* is effectively a game made in that world – a pixel-art odyssey through a crumbling aerial utopia where survivors cling to the ancient technologies of the airborne society to keep themselves alive.

You play as a travelling hero equipped with a shovel that can dig through the terrain or attack enemies on a whim (sound familiar, *Shovel Knight*?) The shovel can be upgraded as you travel through the fading world, one of which can turn you from a scrappy fighter into something of a geomancer with an ability that creates solid ground when you hit the attack button. Expect fiendish vertical puzzles galore.

The world is procedurally-generated, too, meaning that the levels you'll fight, build and dig your way through will be built on algorithms designed to make the most of every available skill, rather than specifically constructed to hold your hand and guide you through a story. Imagine *Spelunky*, *Shovel Knight* and *Guacamelee* all got together and put their best bits into a pot, and you'll have an idea of what to expect from *Skytorn*.

A lot of thought has been put into the character's height in relation to his world: like most pixel-art games, the game is constructed on a bed of tiles – the player is 1.6 tiles high, while walls are typically three tiles high. This means vaulting and clambering over obstacles becomes tricky to animate and fit into the mechanics of the game; does the designer choose to snap the player to the desired platform from a few pixels away, make them slide into a wall-grab position or just lower the whole world a little?

Noel Barry decided that he'd take the *Legend Of Zelda* route – add in a little buffer of a wall-vault that means should your character's bottom tile collide with the wall's top tile, you automatically perform a slight hop over the precipice, back onto solid ground. It sounds small, almost imperceptible, but it's the attention to details like this that makes us excited for *Skytorn*.

We brought *Sonic the Hedgehog* up earlier because this game bears more than a thematic resemblance to one passing level. *Skytorn* is a side-on action platformer with a phenomenal soundtrack instantly reminiscent of *Sonic*, with 16-bit visuals that are well-designed enough to make us salivate. The game has currently only been announced for PS4, but the developer has stated their interest in the title coming to Vita, too. *Towerfall* creator Matt Thorson is attached to the product as level designer, if you needed any more reassurance of how promising *Skytorn* looks.

"Explore. Fight. Find items and enchantments. Dive into the depths of the island to find out what's going on. Y'know, the usual"
SKYTORN WEBSITE







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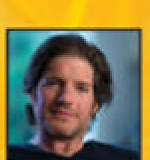
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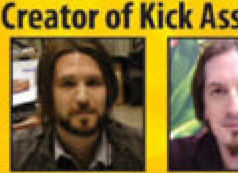
*With a paying adult.

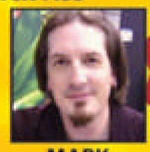
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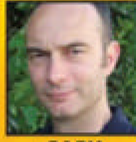

CHARLIE ADLARD


MAHMUD ASRAR


LEE BERMEJO

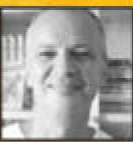

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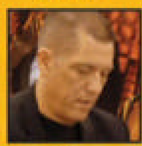

MARK FARMER


GARY FRANK

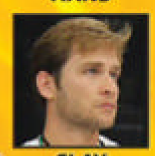

DAVE GIBBONS

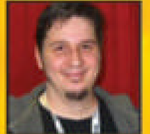

STEPHANIE HANS

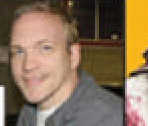

KLAUS JANSON

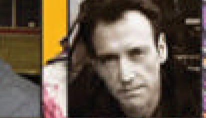

BOB LAYTON

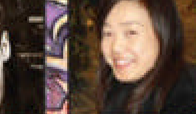

DAVID MACK


CLAY MANN


ED McGUINNESS


MICHAEL AVON OEMING


BILL SIENKIEWICZ


TAKI SOMA

PLUS ELIAS CHATZOUDIS, IAN CHURCHILL, YILDIRAY CINAR, NEIL EDWARDS, RAHSAN EKEDEL, GARY ERSKINE, LEE GARBETT, JEREMY HUAN, PAUL LEVITZ, DAVID LLOYD, EMANUELLA LUPPACHINO, MIKE NORTON, SABINE RICH, VICTOR SANTOS, TIM SEELEY, JAMIE TYNDALL, DEXTER VINES, CHRISTIAN WARD, JOHN WATSON, JK WOODWARD & CHRISSIE ZULLO!

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No Man's Sky

CONCEPT ■ The procedural tech is impressive, but it's support to the real core of the game: a conceptually basic but ostensibly brilliant sci-fi experience

Hello Games says hello world, solar system, galaxy

For centuries, writers have looked up at heavenly bodies and wondered what secrets those wanderers held. Before we had the technology to send robots to Mars or even to look at it more closely from Earth, the only way to reach other worlds was imagination. *No Man's Sky* is imagination taken to extremes, an entire persistent digital galaxy created through an awe-inspiring process, both as a technical achievement and through the experiences it enables.

Following the fundamental rule of "show, don't tell", Hello Games has spoken little of mechanics or lore, but each of the handful of trailers that have so far been released conveys the exploratory, inquisitive spirit of the game. Whatever else players are able to do in *No Man's Sky*, the initial instinctive desire is to touch down on one of these procedurally-generated planets and explore. It's sci-fi. It's human nature. It's all of the five following things

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4
Origin: UK
Publisher: Hello Games
Developer: In-house
Release: 2015
Players: Massively Multiplayer

Developer Profile

Since its inception in 2009, Hello Games has produced only games in the *Joe Danger* series, with *No Man's Sky* its first divergence. The British studio fell prey to British weather in 2013, when a Christmas Eve flood laid waste to the office and many of its contents.

Developer History

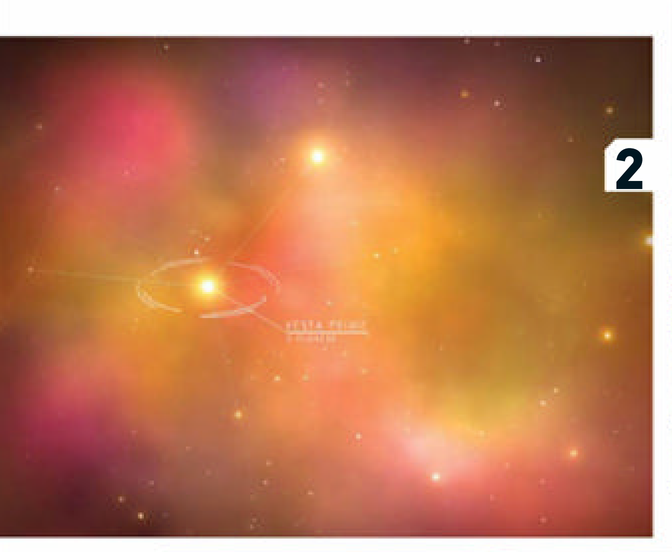
Joe Danger **2010 [PS3, 360, iOS, PC, Vita]**
Joe Danger 2: The Movie **2012 [PS3, 360, PC, Mac, Linux]**
Joe Danger Touch **2013 [iOS]**
Joe Danger Infinity **2014 [iOS]**

High Point

Many avid gamers will remember Hello Games co-founder Sean Murray's demonstration of *No Man's Sky* on stage at E3 2014 as the essential highlight of Sony's entire press conference.

1 A SINGULAR GOAL – THE REST IS UP TO YOU

Though lacking the segmented structure of a narrative game or the side-quest shopping list of an MMO, *No Man's Sky* does have an overarching goal for those who like direction in their games. Each player begins on a different planet near the edge of the galaxy, with a simple spaceship nearby ready to take them into orbit. The galaxy is your oyster, but a glance at the map will reveal a mysterious pearl at the centre. To reach that core and discover its secrets, you'll need to get a better ship, and for that you'll need money. Wonderfully, you're enriched through your galactic discoveries, selling off resources collected in your travels and fuelling the next leg of the journey.



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"Normally as a developer, your game doesn't often surprise you, but I've just been grinning ear to ear as I've explored"

SEAN MURRAY, HELLO GAMES

2 A VERY BIG THING THAT CONTAINS A GREAT NUMBER OF PLANETS

Reaching the centre of the galaxy will take time, surrounded as it is by hundreds of millions of solar systems. This game world is beyond huge – practically infinite if technically limited. Hello Games has spouted ridiculous numbers, stating that even if planets were discovered at the rate of one a second it would take billions of years to find them all. That's not all stored on a server somewhere. Instead, the galaxy's persistence is borne through mathematics. There are no loading times because the code ensures that for each player, each part of the galaxy is created afresh as they approach, identical each time.

3 A BUNCH OF DIFFERENT WAYS TO GET FROM A TO B

Throughout your journey, travel is possible on a range of scales. You can walk across a planet's surface or, if you've upgraded your suit, explore any rivers or even underwater caverns. A basic spaceship can take you through the air at speed or lift you into orbit, but get yourself an interstellar drive and you can even warp between whole systems. You choose your pace in every sense. Recently, Hello Games showed another, more mysterious mode of travel: portals. Apparently discoverable on a planet's surface, these are doorways to other planets, and the distances that they can take you across are as of yet unknown.

4 TEEMING WITH LIFE, JUST NOT ON EVERY PLANET

Life in *No Man's Sky* exists in many forms. While only a relatively small percentage of planets will host plants and animals, that'll only enhance the joy of actually discovering a new species. Many players will be counting down the time to their first giant lizard – commonly known as space dinosaurs – as seen in trailers and screenshots. As for more intelligent creatures, each solar system hosts a space station at which you can sell your goods, and some planets also play host to giant robots. And if AI isn't enough, there's always the potential to come across other players as you cross paths in the void of space.

5 SO MASSIVE THAT EVEN MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER COULD FEEL LONELY

Despite ticking all of the boxes, particularly the first, *No Man's Sky* isn't really an MMO, at least according to the developers. Given the immensity of the galaxy and the fact that each player begins their journey on a different planet, each of which could be the size of the Earth, incidental meetings will be rare and intentional ones a challenge. Any loneliness will be offset, however, by the player names that appear by each discovered planet on the galaxy map. We predict at least some of those names will have been chosen to elicit a chuckle, too.



MONSTER MASHER

THE TOMORROW CHILDREN lets you do what you want, when you want. If you want to spend the whole game harvesting and constructing, you can. Players more interested in combat and defence, fear not: your city will come under attack from roving monsters, and you can build defensive structures or robots to keep it safe from weird ants, Godzilla-inspired mega-lizards and God knows what else.

The Tomorrow Children

CONCEPT *The Tomorrow Children* wants to give you absolute freedom – built on the *Minecraft* model with a Soviet edge, the game is an experiment in free thought

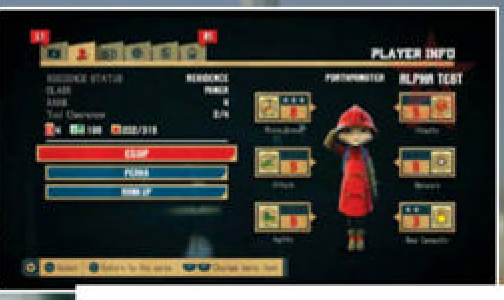
Gaming's first social(ist) experiment

When Q-Games was told about the PS4, its architecture and its aims as a piece of hardware, the studio made an immediate and formative decision – to build a game directly tied into what the PS4 was built to do. It was a console built to foster a community, to encourage sharing and become a microcosmic entity that channels the Internet as a whole. *The Tomorrow Children*, therefore, is a project built around making the most out of our new interconnected, cyber-social community.

Thing is, the game is also about Marxism, and is aesthetically lined with a distinctly Communist Russian vibe. With *Minecraft* acting as a reference point, *The Tomorrow Children* wants you to work with others to achieve goals – claim new lands, build new landmarks. It aims to cultivate a new virtual society, but in a self-aware way – 'a game-like virtual society', according to Q-Games founder Dylan Cuthbert. It's ambitious – we hope enough people adopt the game's bleak aesthetic to make Cuthbert's dream reach fruition...

MIND OVER MATTER?

THE GAME'S BLEAKNESS is the result of a Soviet experiment gone awry in the fictional Sixties – Russian scientists tried to merge all human consciousness into a singularity and failed. The result? The white void that coats the planet. 100 years later, when you're playing, you can save human souls (imprisoned in Russian Dolls) to repopulate the globe. The more humans you collect, though, the more work there'll be looking after them…



BLACK MARKET

YOU CAN FIND old American currency dotted around the map. This faux-Capitalist money can be traded in at the Black Market, the vendors of which will give you infinitely better gear that can reward you with resources straight away. But using the Black Market comes at a price and grows this dark economy, potentially at the expense of your own government – but maybe you *want* that?

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Q-Games
Release: TBC 2015
Genre: Sandbox
Players: 1-4 (TBC)

Developer Profile

Q-Games has been operational since 2006, working out of a headquarters in Kyoto, Japan. The studio – most well-known for its *PixelJunk* series – is actually headed up by a Westerner (Dylan Cuthbert), and we reckon the studio's unique approach to game-making is driven by the fusion of both Western and Eastern cultures

Developer History

Star Fox Command
2006 [Nintendo DS]
PixelJunk Shooter
2009 [PSN, PC, Mac]
PS3 music visualizer
2013 [PS3]

"The fact that [Dex] is not detached from nowadays reality, but rather quite close to it, makes the storytelling more personal"
JAN JIRKOVSKÝ DREADLOCKS LTD.

The cluttered backdrops in *Dex*'s cityscape can be visual storytelling elements in their own right and set the tone nicely.

Dex

CONCEPT ■ Cyberpunk shenanigans in a 2D dystopia with open-ended quests, cybernetic upgrades and a storyline players can pick up or drop as they please

Future corporate warfare pits human against machine

In videogames, the future is never a nice place. What would we do with ourselves if we pushed start only to find that everything was fine? *Dex* is set to continue this pessimistic trend as a nostalgic 2D action-RPG.

Humanity is a cybernetically-enhanced nest of individuals, struggling to accept themselves in a world where corporate interests rule over all and the value of a machine outweighs that of a person's life. Still, there are people who are trying to make things better. You're one of them. Or are you? If it sounds similar to the backdrop of PC gaming classic *Deus Ex* that's probably because it is, but *Dex* seems to have its own voice, its own style and its own ideas about how to tackle the complex subject matter.

There's an emphasis on freedom in *Dex*. The game wants to be as flexible as any open-world RPG, and that open-endedness extends to how players complete quests and solve problems. Punching, kicking and shooting have their part to play, but there's also platforming, hacking, sabotage and sneakiness.

While the stealth components are a little less convincing in the current Early Access build, there are promised tweaks and tools that will soften the experience to a point where it's a feasible option. Your character, Dex, can evolve to specialise or diversify in the manner that works best for you, and new pathways will open up accordingly as a result. This all ties into a cyberpunk narrative where the lines between good and bad are more than just a little fuzzy, and players get to decide where they sit on the Saint/Bastard spectrum.

The sub-plots and quests on offer make the most of *Dex*'s grimy backdrop: you're tasked with rescuing "flesh and blood" (read: non-augmented) prostitutes, tackling vicious cyborg mercs with barely a natural organ left in them, and fetching deadly chemicals from an abandoned factory, among other things.

Dex's world is looking diverse and impressive. More than that, it feels alive. The streets are peppered with random pedestrians going about their business; vehicles and crowds pass back and forth in the immediate foreground; commercials and holographic displays flicker on the walls. Go to some of the rougher neighbourhoods and the disparity between rich and poor is made obvious with crumbling buildings, drug dens and gangs.

In restricting itself to a 2D playing field, developer Dreadlocks has managed to build a game that's in many ways bigger and more convincing than would be possible in 3D. *Dex* is looking more and more like a praiseworthy contender in the RPG landscape. Once all its gameplay systems are in place we could have something very interesting here.

INFORMATION

Details

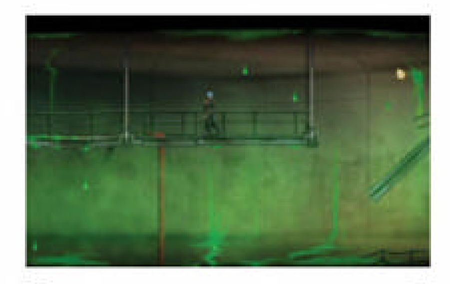
Format: PC, Mac, Linux
Origin: Czech Republic
Publisher: Dreadlocks Ltd.
Developer: In-house
Release: Q2 2015 [Steam Early Access]
Players: 1

Developer Profile

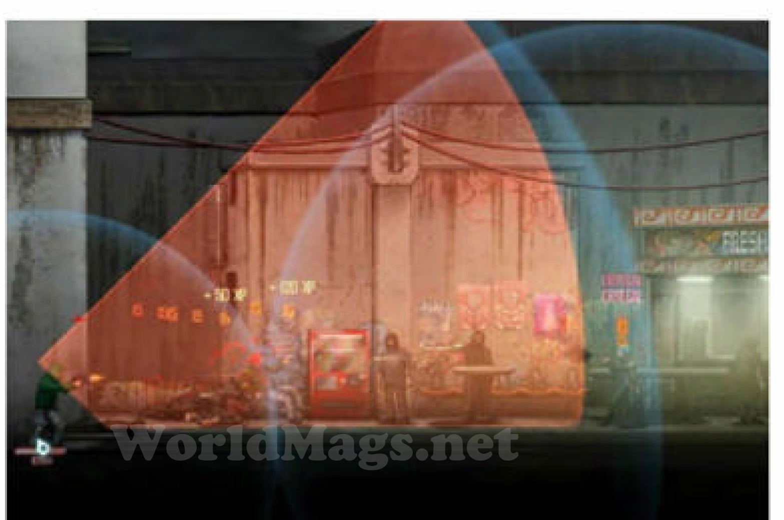
Like a lot of independent teams who manage to secure crowd-funding for their projects, Dreadlocks Ltd. is comprised of industry veterans who are no strangers to game development. *Dex* has proven popular on Early Access.

High Point

Dreadlocks Ltd. put up its Kickstarter for *Dex* in mid-November 2013, reaching over double the initial goal of £14,000. In the run-up to Christmas that's nothing less than a huge achievement.



Above: Some areas, like this deserted chemical factory, are only survivable after you've installed specific upgrades. In this case, a respirator.



There are 14 playable characters in *Type-0* – that may seem bloated at first, but each of them has a place in the traditional *Final Fantasy* class system





IT'S NOT GARDEN, BUT...

THE STORYLINE OF *Type-0* is as off the wall as you'd expect, and we love it. After fighting through the tutorial, you enter Akademia – the college that *Type-0* uses as its hub. When you enter the academy after each mission, you'll have a timer that will count down in hours every time you perform an activity. There's a Chocobo Ranch, a terrace, a war room, a classroom and other locations to explore in this time. The clock mechanic reminds us heavily of *Persona 4*; managing where you spend your time is vital.

Above The battles are more involving than numbered *Final Fantasy* games, for better or worse.
Right: Considering it's a college-based story, *Final Fantasy Type-0* is a *lot* darker than you'd expect.





Final Fantasy Type-0 HD

CONCEPT ■ Set in a world torn apart by a war over crystals, an academy of super-powered students is called upon to save their country… and the world

Is Square Enix's most famous property back on the right road?

For a long time, fans have been clamouring for the *Final Fantasy* series to 'go back to its roots' – for the flagship Japanese RPG series to re-embrace the turn-based combat that made the series synonymous with the role-playing game. Fans want classes again, they want wide open worlds where you can go and defeat insane optional sub-bosses and grind away for the best weapons whilst escorting some dandy-haired protagonist into a battle with God, or something.

Final Fantasy Type-0 doesn't feature any of that, and we think it's for the better. Instead, the game is far more action centred than anything the series has seen so far (well, at least in the main canon). Instead, we'd compare it to *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII*, or *Final Fantasy Crisis Core* – the main battle mechanic decks each of your primary characters out with a selection of moves recognisable from the game's parent series, and maps each attack to a corresponding face button, with one reserved for dodging.

We mention dodging specifically because you'll die without it. Just because the game doesn't operate on a turn-based 'wait' battle system doesn't mean its not punishing. Class Zero is made up of twelve students – each taking their name from the different values of cards, from Ace through to King (with an additional two fighters named Machina and Rem also playable). Each of these characters has a different weapon, and a different selection of attacks, and to progress through the game, you'll have to tactically compose teams of three fighters at a time to take down a level's enemies. The monsters and humans you'll encounter are baying for your blood, and in true *Final Fantasy* style, the bestiary is as impressive as it is broad – we played through the first three hours and encountered everything from mechs to monsters to suspiciously PSICOM-looking enemies, the likes of which you'd find in *Final Fantasy XIII*.

Enemies are subdivided by rank: there are bosses, sub-bosses and grunts. Sub-bosses tend to wall off certain areas, and killing them will make all the grunts in the area 'surrender' – if you catch them before they run off, they'll drop rare loot. Deciding whether to item hunt or exterminate all enemies for more and more experience is just one way you'll have to balance progression.

> "The voice of our Western fans was instrumental in the development of Final Fantasy Type-0"
>
> **HAJIME TABATA** SQUARE ENIX

///Rather than the traditional *Final Fantasy* weaknesses and immunities, *Type-0* attributes critical hits and the like to 'breaks' in the opponents animations: time your attacks *just right* and you can deal up to ten times more damage than you usually would, or even insta-kill weaker enemies. Between your eclectic cast of students, you'll need to learn how each individual attack and ability works to deal the highest possible damage-per-second to enemies. We've seen comments that *Type-0* is a 'lazy game' somehow – that its battle system is unrefined. We couldn't disagree more.

The way you level up has been altered, too. Since each member of Class Zero has been genetically recreated from a mysterious magical element known as 'phantoma', you'll need to harvest this magical juice from enemies in order to buff their abilities and recover MP. You're effectively playing as a group of college undergrads that have been made to fight a war they don't understand, whose primary powers are a mix of vampirism and summoning. It's as *Final Fantasy* as you'd expect, just without the turn-based battling.

Type-0 is, if nothing else, a precursor for what we can expect *Final Fantasy XV* to offer. After all, Hajime Tabata – the director of *Type-0* – is also heading up production on *XV*, alongside composer Takeharu Ishimoto, who is also attached to both projects. The blend of action and RPG game elements isn't incidental between the games, neither is the inclusion of *XV*'s Episode Duscae in the *Type-0* release. Both exist within the Fabula Nova Crystallis series, and Square Enix is keen to make sure we realise that these games, in some way, are the foundation which modern *Final Fantasy* is going to build itself upon.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: In-house
Release: 20 March
Genre: Action-RPG
Players: 1

Developer Profile

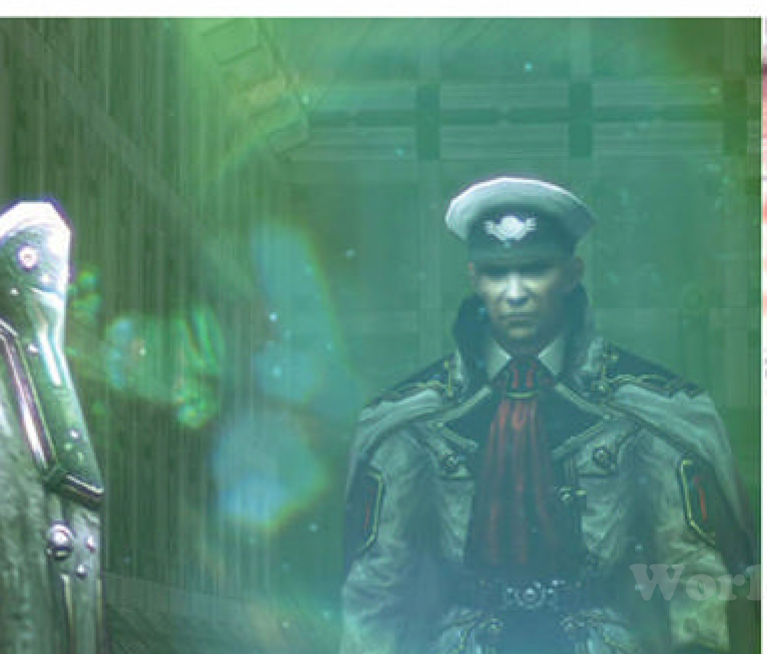
Square Enix used to be two companies – SquareSoft and Enix. *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* are its biggest properties.

Developer History

Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn **Multi [2013]**
Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance **3DS [2012]**
Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together **PSP [2010]**

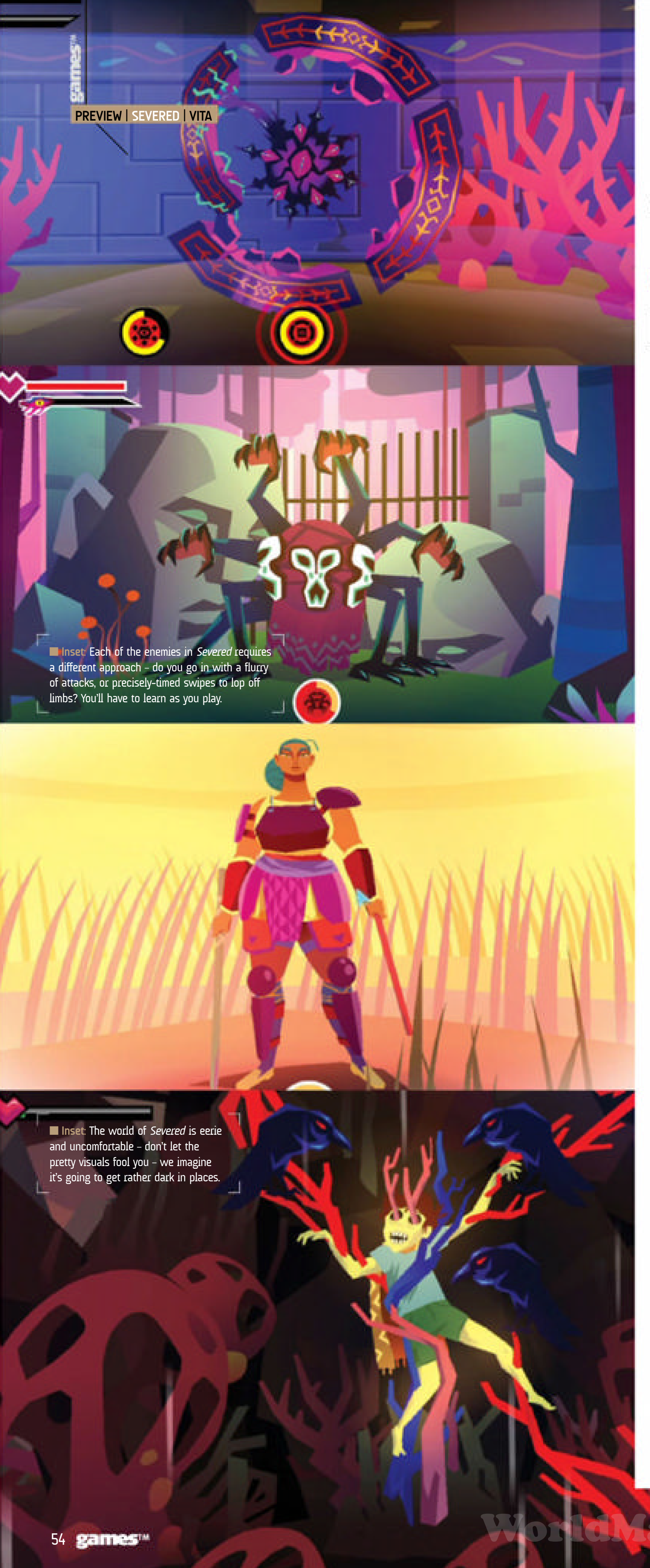
High Point

Final Fantasy X is half-game, half scathing criticism of organised religion. It's gripping, emotional and challenging – the perfect *Final Fantasy* balance.





■ Above We enjoyed how much the game forces you to watch the enemies; taking advantage of their animation frames is the key to success in most battles.



Inset: Each of the enemies in *Severed* requires a different approach – do you go in with a flurry of attacks, or precisely-timed swipes to lop off limbs? You'll have to learn as you play.

Inset: The world of *Severed* is eerie and uncomfortable – don't let the pretty visuals fool you – we imagine it's going to get rather dark in places.

Severed

CONCEPT ■ An RPG dungeon-crawler about redemption and revenge, featuring a lethal one-armed heroine and a horde of inky bad guys

Don't worry – she's 'armless

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Vita
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Drinkbox
Release: 2015
Genre: FPS dungeon-crawler
Players: 1

Developer Profile

An independent studio located in Toronto, Drinkbox was founded in 2008 by a trio of friends following the closure of their previous studio – Pseudo Interactive. Drinkbox has provided development work for other studios as well as creating its own IP to critical acclaim.

Developer History

Tales From Space: About a Blob **2011 [PS3]**
Tales From Space: Mutant Blob Attack **2012 [Vita]**
Guacamelee! **2013 [Multi]**

High Point

Guacamelee! was originally developed for the Vita, and remains one of the strongest titles available on the platform. Making great use of the Vita's native hardware, alongside phenomenal sound design and level craft, Guacamelee! is a classic already.

We often come across criticism levied at Sony's Vita console – there seems to be a misconception that it's bereft of games. We'll admit, the exclusive line-up on the handheld is scant, but that just means that when another one comes along it's a cause for celebration. Enter *Severed* – the newest title from Drinkbox Studios. *Severed* is a dungeon crawler, developed by a team of Westerners – that in itself is curious enough. But when you consider its premise – a first-person voyage into dungeons and labyrinths as a one-armed warrior heroine who uses the limbs of her enemies as upgrades – it suddenly gets more interesting.

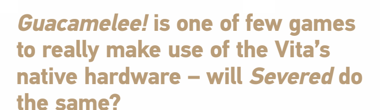
The game is an open-ended adventure – part puzzle, part RPG – that uses a bright palette and unique visual style to communicate a story that's reminiscent of both *Adventure Time* and Carroll's *Alice* stories. Each enemy encounter plays like an action puzzle in and of itself, training your muscle memory for the inevitable boss fights that'll strain your fingers and your brain.

We spoke to Chris McQuinn, designer at Drinkbox, about where *Severed* came from, and where the studio hopes it's going…

Drinkbox Studios is the only Western developer we know of working on a first-person dungeon crawler – why did you choose to work in that genre?

The original idea for *Severed* came from an amalgamation of ideas we had during our first [internal] Game Jam. One of the ideas proposed revolved around touch-based mechanics – then, knowing we were going to face enemies head-on, it made sense to create a dungeon crawler. Presenting the world like that, and making the most of these mechanics – it kind of went hand in hand.

> "The controls actually come together in a really elegant combination that only the Vita can provide"
>
> CHRIS MCQUINN, DESIGNER, DRINKBOX STUDIOS



Guacamelee! is one of few games to really make use of the Vita's native hardware – will *Severed* do the same?

So, you navigate with the D-pad or stick, and the combat is all done via the touchscreen. It actually comes together in a really elegant combination that only the Vita can provide – a *very* solid touchscreen, with the ease of navigation with the stick… if you just use the touchscreen as a button, to move forward, it feels like you're wasting it. So we go the exact opposite way, and really make the most of that screen – how you touch the screen and how you swipe plays heavily into the combat of *Severed*.

Severed seems to take elements of the JRPG and fuses them with real-time action games – would you cite JRPGs as influences?

For sure, yeah – there are some guys in the office that are pretty serious JRPG fans. In terms of the game: deciding which enemies to strike first, picking advantageous spells to use against vulnerable enemies and other mechanics we've included have definitely been inspired by a more Japanese vein of gaming.

Guacamelee! contained a complex meta-game that prolonged the life of the experience extensively. Will *Severed* include something similar?

Here at Drinkbox, we're all aware of how important a fun meta-game is, and right now – if I were to predict where *Severed*'s meta-game would go – it'd come down to how you tackle the game's non-linear path: like *Mega Man*, depending on which boss you tackle first, you'll have different abilities to take them on with. So your route determines your abilities, and we want to replicate the *Mega Man* meta-game.

What's been your favourite moment of the game so far?

I think my favourite moments are the little surprises – in our demo, we've got this moment where the main character goes into her old house, and she's looking around. She moves over to a mirror and she sees someone behind her that wasn't there before… it's just nice and surprising and spooky. [Laughter] We didn't have the opportunity to play with the first-person perspective in any of our previous games, so we're definitely taking advantage of that as much as we can now in *Severed*.

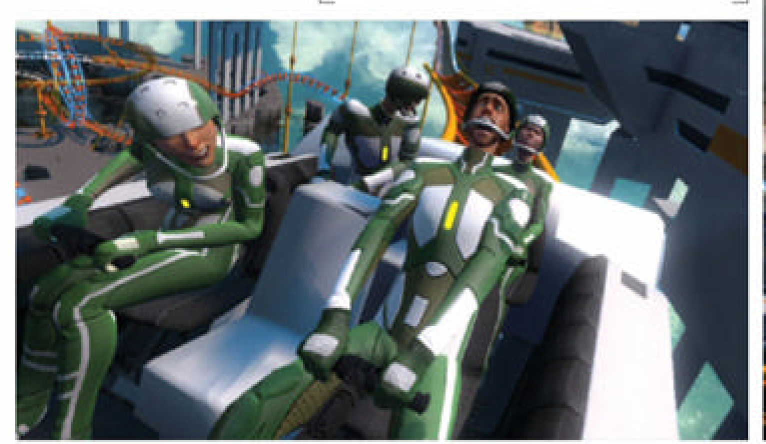
Inset: The game's main character loses her arm… luckily for us, that doesn't make her any less dangerous.

MAKING A 3D GAME WITH 2D ART?

THIS ONE IS unusual for a dungeon crawler – traditionally, the genre moves the player around a grid, making you navigate mazes made of blocks that are on-rails and restrictive. They might be a roguelike/procedurally-generated, but they're still very rigid templates. *Severed* seeks to innovate within the genre, making the game feel more fluid, giving you more freedom to explore…

"Okay, so the game is made of rooms – or nodes – and each node is a cylinder that's presented in 3D," explains McQuinn. "But we didn't want to actually make a 3D world because we wanted our artists to still be able to create lush, vibrant 2D art. What we did was take 2D images and wrap them to the inside of a 3D cylinder, so as a player you can move 360 degrees, see into the distance and feel like you're in a 3D world. So we've managed to give you that 3D feel but with all the advantages of using 2D art and assets."

Below: The style of the characters is borne from the desire to put humans in physically challenging situations – such as flying head-first through a wall – without an expectation of gore.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360, Xbox One
Origin: UK
Publisher: Microsoft Studios
Developer: Frontier Developments
Release: TBC 2015
Genre: Construction/ management simulator
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Frontier has been in business since 1994, and is widely known for its work on the *Elite* series – recently launching *Elite: Dangerous*. The company has also been working with Microsoft Studios for over four years, specifically with the Kinect hardware with the *Kinectimals* franchise.

Developer History

Frontier: Elite II **1994 [Amiga]**
RollerCoaster Tycoon **2003 [Xbox]**
Kinectimals **2010 [Xbox 360, Android, iOS]**

High Point

The sheer scale of *Frontier: Elite II* made the game incredible on release, and the physics engine doesn't feel like it's aged a day, even now.

ScreamRide

CONCEPT Discarding the old theme-park-builder game, Frontier has instead moved onto a construction and management simulator, taking the genre to its logical conclusion.

Giving theme park fans the chaos they always wanted

Frontier Developments found success in a niche market with *RollerCoaster Tycoon 3*, delivering the idea of theme-park simulation to a wider cross-section of fans in the mainstream than previous games. With *ScreamRide* moving so far away from the foundations *RollerCoaster Tycoon 3* laid down, however, we're curious to see what strands of DNA can be found in Frontier's newest project.

"*RollerCoaster Tycoon 3* fans generally had fun with 'peep torture' by crashing coasters," explains executive producer Gerard Huke. "It was a logical progression to focus on this aspect. Coaster and scenery building has also evolved from the roots we put down in *RollerCoaster Tycoon 3* into the modular and fully destructible system we have today in *ScreamRide*."

The game came from humble beginnings; where the team at Frontier was considering what more could be done to innovate within the creative sandbox space. "We wanted to focus on the kind of sandbox destruction that was a tantalising possibility from traditional theme-park sims, but never the main focus," details Huke. "The absurdity grew and grew as we watched things like 'The Centrifuge Brain Project' and we pushed the limits of what was possible with the rides and the level of destruction until it felt suitably epic."

ScreamRide's new elements serve more than just a cosmetic role – the game is striving to move away from the genre's deep affiliation with the PC. *ScreamRide* is, after all, a console-exclusive game. "*ScreamRide* is very different compared to a traditional PC park sim – it has much more action gameplay in addition to park creation," explains Huke.

"The campaign mode has three different career paths: ScreamRider, Demolitions Expert and Engineer. The first two are very action-oriented – you actually pilot coasters and launch amusement rides into buildings respectively. The Engineer path is more puzzle-based with construction and destruction challenges that need more consideration. Whether you play Campaign mode or create your own experiences in the built-in Level Maker, the game is a great console experience from the ground up."

> "The final ScreamRider level is an epic snaking monster of a track and provides a serious challenge"
> GERARD HUKE EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, FRONTIER DEVELOPMENTS

Between Campaign mode and the Level Editor, you're given access to exactly the same tools the developers themselves used to build the game. Huke reveals, "We felt that was important to give players the same power as the developers to realise their creative visions. Players can share their levels on Xbox One with the rest of the community so we hope the creators, the fans who love to build cool stuff, will make awesome levels that feed the people who just like to play."



Above: The increased power of the Xbox One enabled Frontier to simulate the huge number of physics objects necessary to build the detailed and fully destructible levels in ScreamRide.

"We want to use the unique features of the DualShock 4 to allow you to interact with a tactile paper world"
MICHELLE DUCKER, MEDIA MOLECULE

Tearaway Unfolded

CONCEPT ■ A continuation of the same themes and design concepts as 2013's brilliant *Tearaway* on Vita, *Unfolded* aims to make the best use yet of the Dual Shock 4's input options

Paper craft puns… they're tearable

It's difficult not to be immediately charmed by *Tearaway Unfolded.* The colours, the characters, the childlike sense of adventure it promotes and the intuitive way in which you interact with it all combining to create a result that is as enchanting as it is endearing. Like a child with Lego, the resulting construction is a hodgepodge of elements that make sense only when you lose yourself in its innocent ridiculousness.

This PS4-exclusive is smartly opting to not change all that much from *Tearaway*'s 2013 debut on Vita, the core idea of a simple platformer set within a digital recreation of a hand-crafted world is still very much intact. Perhaps *Tearaway*'s biggest draw is that, despite being digital, it feels real thanks to each and every visual element being created from a series of brightly coloured paper cut outs. Henri Matisse eat your heart out.

As on Vita you play as a messenger on a quest to deliver a message to you, the player. If you've got a PlayStation Camera you appear, quite literally, on the screen as the shining object of victory waiting at the end of your own journey. It's all very self-referential, very fourth-wall defying.

Where *Tearaway* took advantage of the Vita's input capabilities – primarily the front and rear touch screen/pad – *Unfolded* is looking to do the same with the DualShock 4. The controller's own touch pad can be pressed to beat drums that kick your messenger into the air and fling obstacles out the way. It can also be swiped across with your thumb to throw objects that have been launched into the screen and 'into your hands', this being an essential means of solving certain puzzles. Elsewhere, the controller's motion controls give you total command over a beam of light that can stun enemies with a view to creating a safe path – although 'enemies' is probably a tad too harsh of a term from what are essentially very cute, but grumpy, origami boxes.

All of these controls work perfectly and communicate that exact same attraction as was so powerful on Vita. Where the controls work less well is in the process of cutting out shapes and designs that you can then apply to the world to customise and personalise it. On the Vita, you could simply draw your intended design with your finger on the touch screen, but here you're disconnected thanks to having to rely on an analogue as a pencil. It's not ideal, but it works well enough to craft the kind of crude shapes that are in keeping with the vibe of this world.

Trying to cram the ideas of a Vita game into a home console release is always going to experience a few teething problems. The important thing lies in making sure that the required changes remain in keeping in with the core design philosophy of making sure players feel as though they're part of this hand-crafted world.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 4
Origin: UK
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Media Molecule
Release: TBC 2015
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Founded by former employees of Lionhead Studios in 2006, Media Molecule's short existence has thus far been dominated by *LittleBigPlanet* – a franchise that it designed and created. The studio stuck to *LittleBigPlanet*'s 'creation' theme for *Tearaway*, its only other game to date, which launched on PS Vita in 2013. The Guildford-based studio is wholly owned by Sony.

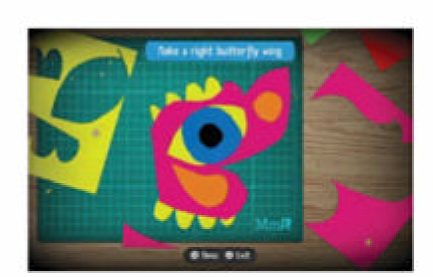
Developer History

LittleBigPlanet **2008 [PS3]**
LittleBigPlanet 2 **2011 [PS3]**
Tearaway **2013 [PS Vita]**

High Point

LittleBigPlanet is still, rightly, considered by many to be the best example of how to provide in-game creation tools to players.





■ Above Using an analogue stick to cut out shapes works well enough, but it was undoubtedly easier using the Vita's touch screen.



■ Left: Bosses such as this spider have to be overcome using your wits and any useful elements you might have nearby. Below: Being a fungus has its advantages, like being able to hook yourself into tight spaces and grow towards higher ones.

Mushroom 11

CONCEPT ■ You're a shape-shifting organism that squeezes through the smallest tunnels, climbs walls and absorbs mutated creatures in a post-apocalyptic world.

Picking up where humanity left off

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC/Mac/Linux/iOS/Android
Origin: US
Publisher: Untame Games
Developer: In-house
Release: April 2015
Genre: Puzzle platformer
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Untame Games had a promising start. In 2011 it released *Rope Rescue* on iOS, which became a top-ranked game on the US Appstore. *Mushroom 11* is its first 'big' project, growing out of a 2012 Global Game Jam where lead developer Itay Keren made the prototype in just eight hours.

High Point

Keren's prototype for *Mushroom 11* won the Best Game Design award at Global Game Jam. It also caught attention from veteran devs at Indie Fund, who are sponsoring its development.

Players identify with the avatars they control: these are, in essence, a virtual extension of our own bodies. We have a natural inclination to preserve our virtual selves as best we can, to prevent harm or death from touching us.

Mushroom 11 pushes the boundaries of that commitment, asking players what they're prepared to lose in order to progress. It's a strange sensation to play as a character with no defined features, save for a green hue and pulsing veins. It's stranger still to realise that almost every part of you is disposable.

The amorphous organism you play as has a fixed mass. Deleting pieces of yourself with the left and right mouse buttons allows you to go into narrow spaces or roll forwards. This strange fungus is ever-changing, but it has substance. There are puzzles where you have to divide your body, keeping a piece on a switch while the rest makes its way through a door. It's possible to anchor yourself in the landscape, climbing through obstacles that wouldn't be doable for conventional characters.

Itay Keren's clever design has given birth to new concepts of videogame life and death. As long as a single piece remains, however small, your body can regenerate to full size within a couple of seconds. This seeming invulnerability has its limits, though.

In the wake of an unknown event, civilisation has been left in ruins. Odd creatures now own the crumbling cities and hostile wilderness. Some of them are benign and can be absorbed into your pulpy mass, while others are toxic and have to be approached, or avoided, with care.

The venomous spiders dangling from cave ceilings are particularly tricky. Touching their legs contaminates your body with a poison that spreads to every cell, turning it purple and necrotic. Only by deleting these toxic parts of yourself are you able to recover fully. However, if you manage to fall on these critters from a height, you can absorb their non-toxic bodies like other creatures.

As you roll and grow across the wasteland, there are vague hints on billboards that lend insight into what happened. It's a nice change from relying on text or spoken dialogue to tell a story, and a haunting soundtrack provided by The Future Sound Of London helps cement a lonely, enticing atmosphere.

Mushroom 11 already looks fantastic. Untame Games is releasing first on desktop, but has expressed an interest in seeing it on as many other platforms as possible, particularly handhelds. There's no denying that from what we've played already, it certainly deserves that level of exposure.

■ Below: The backdrops and foreground are both stunningly detailed, and nothing is without some degree of meaning.



"We want players to ask, 'Are you something good in this world? Are you something bad? What happened and why?'"

ITAY KEREN UNTAME GAMES





Above: *SkySaga* throws gamers into a truly fantastical, imaginative setting.
Below: The developer admits that *SkySaga* combines elements of *Minecraft* with *The Legend of Zelda*, with castles proving staple procedurally-generated sights.

SkySaga: Infinite Isles

CONCEPT It feels like *Minecraft* as players dig for minerals, hunt animals for food and build shelters, but this free-to-play sandbox adventure generates unique mini-quests too

Does the sky have any limits?

Back in the day, teenagers Philip and Andrew Oliver programmed a puzzle-based, platform graphic adventure called *Dizzy* which starred an anthropomorphic egg bouncing around the fairytale land of Katmandu. It did incredibly well, with the twins cracking the series open to create an entire Yolkfolk family and developing Codemasters' biggest franchise of its early years.

Today, the pair are attempting to repeat their feat by offering an endlessly evolving online sandbox world. They have high ambitions – "It's what we have been building up to, what we've always wanted to create," says Philip – but this time around they need help. Radiant Worlds, a company formed from the ashes of Blitz Games Studios purely to develop *SkySaga*, has 70 staff and it has bet the entire studio on this one project. It is using South Korean cash to create a spin on that influential block-building game *Minecraft*, producing an open world of voxels filled with resources and treasure that, it hopes, will be a British money and job creator – one that becomes a gaming staple.

To achieve that, *SkySaga: Infinite Skies*, to give it its full name, is a game of two halves: an adventure and a tool for socialising with friends. It is already proving rather compelling more than a month into its alpha release, serving up desert, forest and freezing cold landscapes, easing gamers in with a structured opening explaining the rules of the game, and allowing would-be adventurers to choose a character according to colour, gender and race.

Players are then given their own customisable floating Home island high in the clouds with anything built here being free from destruction (unless the player agrees for it to be editable). "The home island provides a safe place where the only thing scary is the sheep," explains design director Benjamin Fisher. "We want the player to feel they can build something in a creative way while allowing them the freedom to dig and build as part of a problem-solving skill set. Players can then go on adventures where there are genuine threats."

The adventures come in the guise of mini-quests, each of which are produced by the game's Adventure Director. They take around 40 minutes to complete, setting

> "The alpha testing will go on for months. It's the start of something that will hopefully last for five to ten years"
>
> SASCHA JUNGNICKEL, REPLAY STUDIOS

PLAYER-VERSUS-PLAYER

AT SOME STAGE, *SkySaga* will close down for all but a small number of players, during which time Radiant Worlds will observe play patterns and discover the power of the machines being used to play this server-based offering. One mechanic Radiant Worlds will be looking to maximise, though, is PvP, a social booster that will allow for some tasty battles, although *SkySaga* also wants players to embark on adventures together as well as compete with each other.

One of the key questions is how this free-to-play game will turn a profit, though. The alpha release has no in-game purchases and the developer says it has made no decisions with regards to monetisation.





■ Above: Looks familiar? The voxel-based sandbox game that is *SkySaga: Infinite Lives* may have distinctive joint-less characters but the overall appearance is unmistakably *Minecraft*-esque. It's for players aged 13 and over at this stage but this Lego style will surely help it attract a sizeable audience.

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PC
Origin:
United Kingdom
Publisher:
Radiant Worlds
Developer:
In-house
Release:
TBC 2015
Players:
Massively Multiplayer

Developer Profile

Philip and Andrew Oliver are legendary, long-serving developers whose careers stretch back to the Eighties. For 20 years they ran Blitz Games Studios, a developer-for-hire with a back catalogue based on licences such as *SpongeBob Squarepants*, *Bratz* and *Action Man*. When Blitz went bust in 2013, the twins launched Radiant Worlds.

Developer History

Dizzy – the Ultimate Cartoon Adventure
1986 [Multi]

Pac-Man World 3
2005 [Multi]

High Point

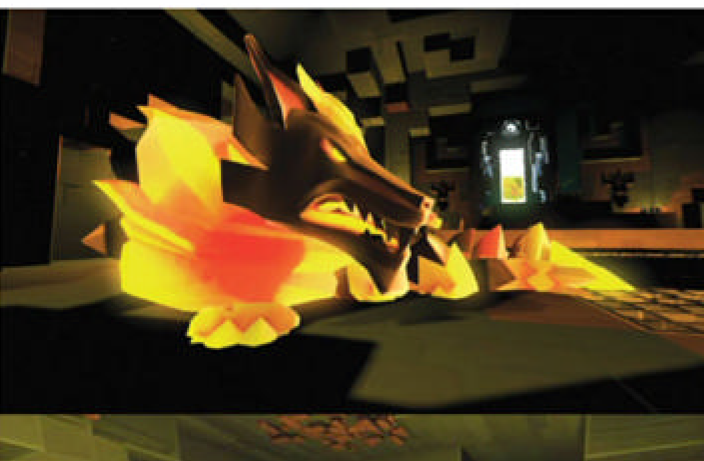
A much-loved series spanning nine core games and six spin-offs, the Oliver twins will be forever linked with the eggs-cellent *Dizzy*.

players off towards a castle to uncover an escape portal. On the way there are goodies – chief among them pieces of keystone that create new quests – and an assortment of evil baddies that are intent on making life difficult. Cue a good old scrap.

What makes the quests stand out is the fact they are procedurally generated, as is much of *SkySaga* (where even the names of the islands are always unique). The landscapes are automatically populated with buildings, each of which are made up of the available resources in a particular environment, and there are caves, dungeons, mountains and assorted nooks and crannies to get your teeth into. The idea is that the adventures get players talking. Gamers can take photographs that show off the various items that they come across and share those screenshots among friends.

Crafting is the number one objective, though. Gamers mine the land, obtain resources and build cool items. Materials can be combined to make any recipe and the properties of the materials will be imbued into the created object. Introduce gold into the equation, for instance, and the crafted item will be heavy, allowing it to inflict more damage. And yet, as powerful as this resulting weapon will be, the gold will slow it down. "Each piece of equipment has positive and negative traits," says Fisher. "We wanted an approach like *Team Fortress*."

It's nowhere near perfect at this stage, though. There are plenty of bugs, some of which even surfaced during the developer's demonstration of the game, but that is the nature of alpha releases and Radiant Worlds is moving towards as bug-free a commercial unleashing as possible. *SkySaga* is set to be a phenomenon.





■ Above: As part of the mini-quests upon which players embark via portals from their Home island are an eclectic assortment of nasties, including this fierce, hungry bear which could, at a pinch, make for a rather delicious meal.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

DRAWN TO DEATH

Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Sony Computer Entertainment**
Developer: **David Jaffe**
ETA: **TBC**



THE CREATOR of *God Of War* and *Twisted Metal* has moved on from the realistic 3D rendering of his past and turned his attentions to the scrapbooks and journals of a creative – and deranged – teenager. *Drawn To Death* is a PS4 exclusive that takes the form of an arena battler with a pen-on-paper aesthetic that looks jarring at first, but could actually be quite decent if handled well. Jaffe has been *very* vocal in defending the game from attackers.

GANG BEASTS

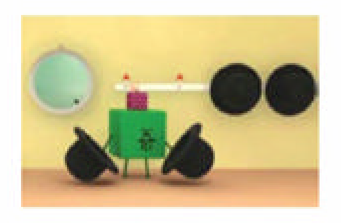
Format: **PC, PS4**
Publisher: **Double Fine Productions**
Developer: **Boneloaf Games**
ETA: **TBC**



THE WORLD'S first jellyman brawler is coming to PS4! There has been little movement on the game since it was released last August as a Steam Early Access title, but we're delighted the doughy punch-'em-up is making it to console. It's a competitive brawler that features a uniquely malleable physics engine that makes it hilariously fun to throw your friends into furnaces or grinders, all while trying to defend yourself from their gooey grips.

WATTAM

Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Sony Computer Entertainment**
Developer: **Funomena**
ETA: **2015**



FROM THE developers behind the *Katamari* games comes *Wattam*, inspired by the idea the lead designer had while playing with his two-year-old son. *Wattam* examines what would happen if all toys were alive, and as such the whole philosophy behind the game's design is based on people and things connecting with each other. The game has a colourful, children's TV aesthetic, and looks as detached from reality as you'd expect .

ETRIAN ODYSSEY V

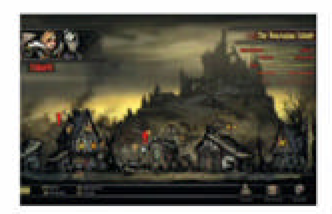
Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **Atlus**
ETA: **2015**



ATLUS' FLAGSHIP dungeon-crawler has formally made it to the fifth level, and will bring along a whole new world for players to fight their way through. There's fairly little about the game floating around, but we do know Atlus has created the game to generate a sense of disaster everywhere you go... It seems the company's work on the doom-laden *Persona 5* is spilling through into all its other projects, too.

DARKEST DUNGEON

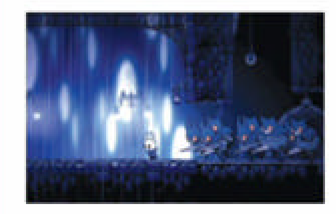
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Red Hook Studios**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



DARKEST DUNGEON is a roguelike dungeon crawler that combines side-scrolling action with a turn-based RPG combat system. You can recruit three other heroes to your side to join you on your quest. Mix that with the attention you'll have to pay to what order your party needs to travel in, the traversal obstacles in your way and the sliding difficulty-to-loot balance that makes up the game, and you've got us interested.

HOLLOW KNIGHT

Format: **PC, Mac, Linux**
Publisher: **Team Cherry**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **2015**



HOLLOW KNIGHT is a 2D action-adventure set in a *Metroidvania*-inspired world of insects, in which you play the enigmatic Hollow Knight – a beetle who sets out to explore the caverns of his homeland to see what dark forces are stopping other adventurers from returning. *Hollow Knight* looks like the perfect game for anyone craving the fluid animation and action of Ubisoft's latest *Rayman* games.

AVIARY ATTORNEY

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Sketchy Logic**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



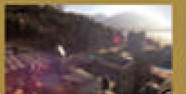
MONSIEUR JAYJAY FALCON is a lawyer, but not just any lawyer – he's a bird-brained barrister, intent on collecting evidence on behalf of his client with which to prosecute the *real* criminals of his world. The game plays incredibly similarly to the *Ace Attorney* games, but with a delightfully avian twist. The art style is reminiscent of old English banknotes, inspired by the obscure work of J J Grandville.

FINAL FANTASY EXPLORERS

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **Racjin**
ETA: **18 December 2014 (JPN)**

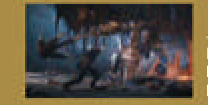


FINAL FANTASY Explorers is proof that Square Enix knows how to ship out work on *Final Fantasy* games without compromising the integrity of the main series. *Explorers* is a 3DS game that celebrates the series long and rich history, featuring the main characters from every numbered game, as well as all the traditional summons and monsters. There's no word on a Western release yet, but we're sure it'll happen.



CANCELLED – Dying Light (PS3, Xbox 360)

Worth noting – we're covering *Dying Light*'s removal from PS3 and Xbox 360 here: it's still releasing on Xbox One/PS4. Techland noted the old systems couldn't possibly handle what the game wanted to do.

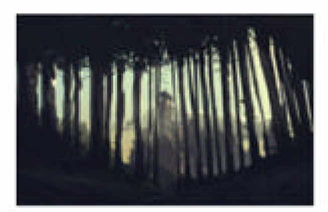


DELAYED – The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (Multi)

It's beginning to feel like *The Witcher 3* will never come out, but we can't begrudge CD Projekt RED too much – the studio only wants to release the best game it can, and it will now be launching in May.

WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH

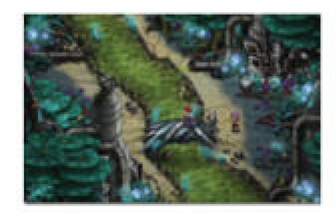
Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Sony Computer Entertainment**
Developer: **Giant Sparrow**
ETA: **2015**



GIANT SPARROW'S *The Unfinished Swan* was a first-person painting game that was apparently inspired by the studio's love for classic children's books. It was received as a horror game, not because it was scary, but because people didn't know what to expect from it. The next game from Giant Sparrow looks like it'll carry on in the same vein, being composed from a series of short stories about a cursed family in Washington State.

COSMIC STAR HEROINE

Format: **Vita, PS4**
Publisher: **Sony Computer Entertainment**
Developer: **Zeboyd Games**
ETA: **2015**



TAKING ITS inspiration from the likes of *Chrono Trigger* and *Suikoden II*, *Cosmic Star Heroine* launched on Kickstarter and was quickly brought into the Sony roster in time for PSX. The game uses an original battle system – something rare for a modern RPG – and requires attackers to build style as they fight: the more attacks they can chain, the more abilities they'll have access to, and the more damage they can dish out.

STRANDED DEEP

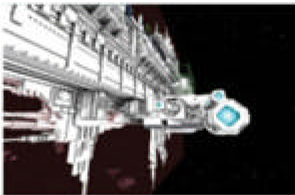
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **BEAMteam**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **2015**



YOU'RE THE last remaining survivor of a plane crash that's left you stranded on a beautiful desert island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The island is procedurally generated and can throw colourful reefs or dark sub-aquatic trenches at you, it can let you relax in a calm sunset or beset you with raging storms that can wash you away. It's a true-to-life, deeply simulator-based survival game; it's a hardcore survivalist game if ever we saw one.

STARMADE

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Schine GmbH**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **2015**



EVER WANTED to play a voxel-based sandbox with all the best bits of *Minecraft* in a pretty-looking space environment? You're in luck – *StarMade* starts by giving you the ability to build your own spaceship before sending you off into the universe to harvest, build and explore. You can choose to become either a terrifying master of combat, or elite trader – it's *Minecraft* in space, with RPG elements.

WHY AM I DEAD AT SEA

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Peltast**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **2015**



"YOU ARE on a boat at sea," reads the game's first official announcement, "also, more importantly, you are dead". The aim of the game is to find out why you're dead, and to do so you'll have to possess various characters on the ship and use them to figure out what lead to your demise. It sounds a little like *Murdered: Soul Suspect*, but better, because it has a more tolerable art direction and seems to weave a unique story that makes sense.

SAURIAN

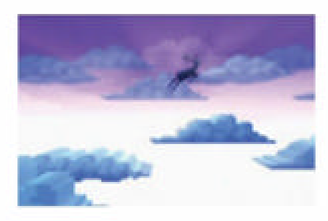
Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Tomozaurus**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **2015**



THERE AREN'T many genuine survival sims out there anyway, but *Saurian* has a wholly unique angle its bringing to the genre: you play as a dinosaur, and have to survive the brutally Darwinistic ecosystem of Earth, 66 million years ago. You can play as a variety of dinosaurs, and will have to adopt your play style to survive. The game is still in pre-alpha, searching for programmers, but so far, so good.

THE DEER GOD

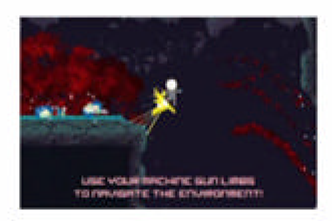
Format: **PC, Ouya, Wii U, Xbox One**
Publisher: **Crescent Moon Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



THE DEER God is a game about survival, reincarnation and karma that's brought to life in a pixelated world that's rendered in 3D. The visuals are sublime; the 16-bit inspired 3D graphics are reminiscent of *Ecco The Dolphin*, and the worlds are nothing short of breath-taking. *The Deer God* is dedicated to the memory of a cardinal the designer accidentally ran over – if that's not enough to attach you to this game, nothing is.

THE ADVENTURES OF STUMPY

Format: **PC, Mac, Linux**
Publisher: **Epic Fun Land**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **Out now**



STUMPY IS a kid that lost his limbs to a nasty truck accident before you meet him. Stumpy found out that every cloud has a silver lining, though, when his missing limbs all got replaced with machine guns… *The Adventures Of Stumpy* was the result of an Indies Vs. PewDiePie game jam that lasted only 72 hours, and the creativity on offer is impressive. It's fun, and yet stupid, in equal measure.

THE 50 BEST DEVELOPERS IN THE WORLD

THE GREATEST TEAMS WORKING IN THE INDUSTRY RATED AND RANKED

How do you judge greatness?

As we took on the task of listing and judging the best developers in the world, we found that simply running them off the top of our heads wasn't particularly satisfying. We needed a metric to cut through personal preferences as impartially as possible. We settled on six key criteria:

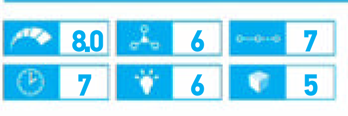
First, the average score across the games media to establish a general level of quality. Second, influence was judged on how impactful a developer's games had been on the rest of the industry. Third, we judged consistency; how good can a studio be if it produces a turkey every other year? Fourth, regularity was judged based on how frequently titles were produced, likewise posing that developing high-quality games and content frequently is something that should be applauded. Fifth, we awarded a score for innovation, as we value new thinking almost as much as anything else. Lastly, and as something of a wildcard rating, we awarded a 'cool factor' score. Such a judgement is completely unscientific, but since some form of subjectivity cannot be avoided, it may as well be embraced transparently.

Ultimately every developer that made it into this 50 is here because we judge them overall to be among the very best, most consistent and most exciting game-makers on the planet, from small indie studios to large, triple-A blockbuster-creators. We expect you to agree with some, disagree with many more, but we'd love to hear your thoughts too. Tweet us @gamesTMmag or email gamestm@imagine-publishing.co.uk and give us your insight.



KEY  Avg. Score  Influence Consistency  Regularity  Innovation  Cool factor

50 Eidos Montreal 39





After *Deus Ex* caught the imagination of gamers with its gorgeous concept art, black-and-gold colour scheme and transhumanist narrative, Eidos Montreal floored everyone *again* with its multiplayer for *Tomb Raider*. *Thief* was a bit disappointing, but Eidos could win over the world again with its *Deus Ex* follow-up this year.

KEY GAME: Deus Ex: Human Revolution

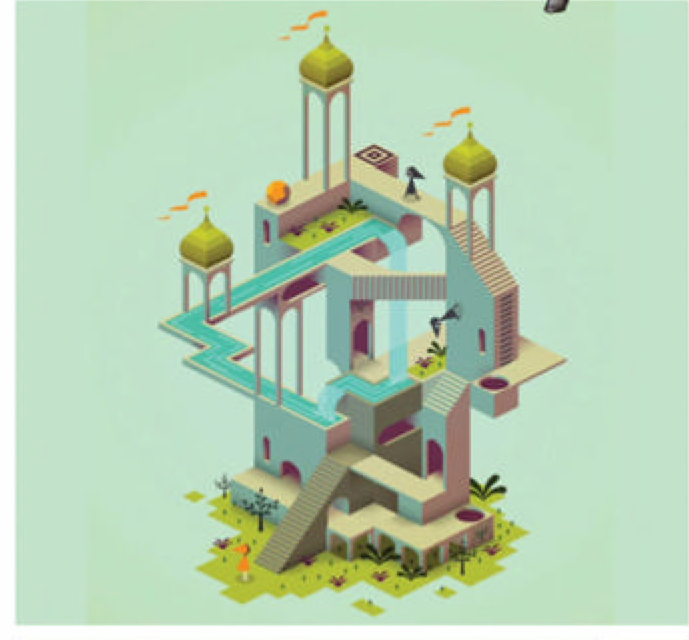
49 Intelligent Systems 39.1





Of all the Nintendo studios, Intelligent Systems probably gets less attention than it deserves. It can take a lot of credit for *Super Mario* and *Fire Emblem*, for instance, while in more recent years, its output has been no less worthy with the likes of *Advance Wars* and *Wario Ware*.

KEY GAME: Advance Wars: Dual Strike



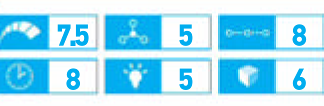
48 Ustwo 39.2

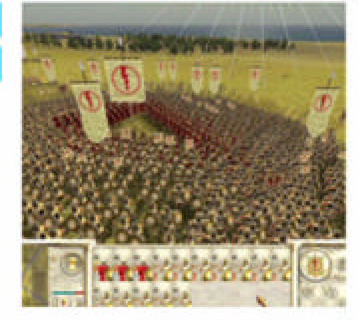
8.2 3 8 8 6 6

This international, three studio operation makes all sorts of apps, but its London team has produced *Whale Trail* and *Monument Valley*; two superb mobile experiences. The latter showed great signs of combining art style with gameplay mechanics with its gorgeous Escher-inspired world.

KEY GAME: Monument Valley

47 The Creative Assembly 39.5

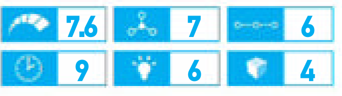




The Creative Assembly recently cherry-picked veterans of the industry to form a team that could tackle the *Alien* franchise in a fresh way. Its integrity and craftsmanship extends beyond just the *Total War* games, and we really hope we get to see more interesting non-RTS titles continue to release from the studio in the coming years.

KEY GAME: Rome: Total War

46 Square Enix (Kitase Team) 39.6



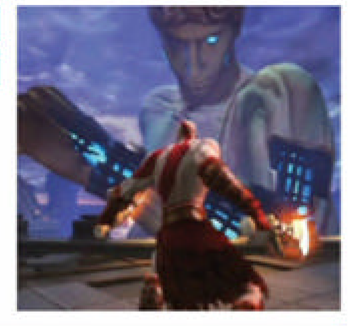


Once upon a time, Kitase and his team at Square Enix could have topped our list, but the recent *Final Fantasy* games he's been involved with have sadly held him back. The recent re-releases of *Final Fantasy X* and *X-2* have kept him relevant, though – and we hope Kitase finds his inspiration again for whatever his next project turns out to be.

KEY GAME: Final Fantasy VII

45 SCE Santa Monica Studio 39.7

8.7 7 8
6 5 5



After showing it knew how to make games by developing the Kinetica engine, Sony Santa Monica went on to develop *God Of War*. Now, the studio proves its place in the industry with the technical progress it's showing in *The Order: 1886* – which probably has the best textures of any game we've seen on new-gen hardware.

KEY GAME: God Of War II

44 Turn10 39.7

8.7 5 9
7 5 5



As the studio that has to go toe-to-toe with Polyphony for the racing sim crown every couple of years, Turn 10 has held its own. What's impressive is its commitment to pushing into new fields, such as its Drivatar tech in *Forza 5*. Plus it has a great relationship with its community with fantastic livery creation tools in every release.

KEY GAME: Forza Motorsport 5

43 CD Projekt Red 39.8

7.8	4	8
7	5	8

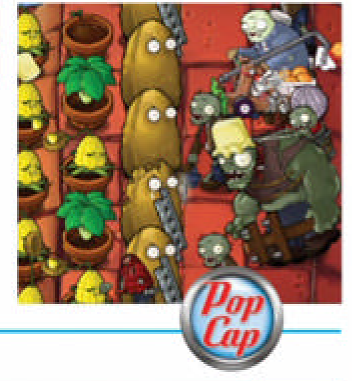
The Polish studio's best work appears to be ahead of it. With *The Witcher 3* near the top of several most wanted lists in 2015, anticipation for this final chapter is greater than for its predecessors. More than anything else, though, CD Projekt Red is garnering a reputation for making games the *right* way. DRM-free, plenty of DLC post launch for everyone at no cost, and delaying release to actually finish the game properly.

KEY GAME: The Witcher 2: Assassins Of Kings

42 PopCap Games 39.8



7.8	6	9
9	5	4

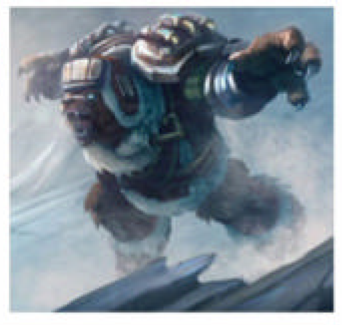


PopCap apparently sells a copy of *Bejeweled* every 4.3 seconds. The studio has a game on just about every platform currently operational – including the Ouya. PopCap rides the fine line between hardcore and casual gamers, making products that can be roundly enjoyed by everyone. And, of course, it introduced the world to *Plants Vs. Zombies.*

KEY GAME: Plants Vs. Zombies

41 Riot Games 39.8

7.8	7	6
5	6	8



As a studio with only one gaming credit to its name, Riot Games has little to hang its hat on, but *League Of Legends* is the most played game on the planet, so that counts for a lot. Whatever Riot does next is going to have a massive impact on the industry. It has attracted that level of interest across the globe to compete with the biggest devs here.

KEY GAME: League Of Legends

40 Quantic Dream 39.9








7.9	7	7	5	8	5

David Cage might get the backs of some gamers up, but you can't argue with his influence – Cage and his team at Quantic Dream are at the cutting edge of digital cinematography, and the developer's work in the motion-capture field continues to innovate. The studio's games might be divisive, but its impact reaches out further than just gaming in the broader appreciation of games as a form of visual art and entertainment.

KEY GAME: Heavy Rain



39 Platinum Games — 40





Shinji Mikami, Atsushi Inaba and Hideki Kamiya founded Platinum – three of the most influential Japanese developers operating today. Only Kamiya remains at the studio, but with an output consisting of *The Wonderful 101* and *Bayonetta 2*, it's clear he's keeping the studio on the right track. Hopefully the upcoming *Scalebound* will offset the disappointing *The Legend Of Korra*.



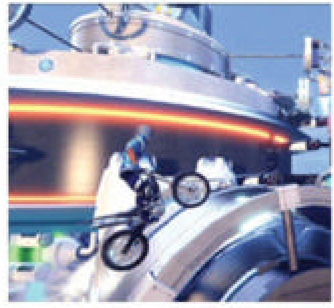
KEY GAME: Bayonetta 2

38 RedLynx — 40.1



9 4 6

You don't have to reinvent the wheel to be good at your craft, just make the most engaging, fun and addictive wheel possible, and that's what RedLynx does. Its small action racers from *Trials* to *MotoHeroz* and *DrawRace* are a joy to play. We expect nothing less of this team now and *Trials Fusion* was as good an example as any.



KEY GAME: Trials Fusion

37 Visceral Studios — 40.2

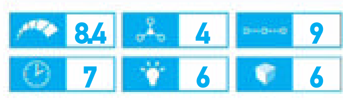
7.2 6 8 8 5 6

Starting on licensed games – *James Bond, Lord Of The Rings, The Simpsons* – Visceral eventually created its own IP (*Dead Space*), and helped define a new generation of survival horror in the process. With an untitled *Star Wars* game in the works, and *Battlefield: Hardline* due for release, we've only seen the start of what Visceral can do...

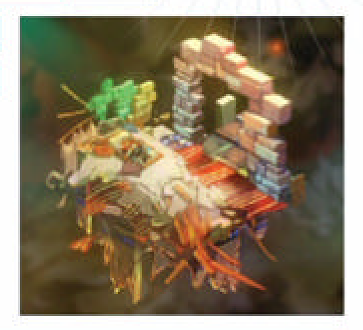
KEY GAME: Dead Space 2

VISCERAL

36 Supergiant Games — 40.4

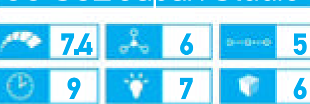


With a commitment to expressive art styles and the kind of versatile gameplay that means it works on practically every platform, Supergiant has made itself one of our must-watch developers, despite releasing only two games. *Bastion*'s reactive narration was deeply impressive and Supergiant again found success with *Transistor*.



KEY GAME: Bastion

35 SCE Japan Studio — 40.4



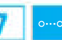
Sony's internal Japanese studio was responsible for *Knack* – which dragged down the developer's consistency and average score – but otherwise its back catalogue is a stellar example of Japanese games with a Western appeal. The studio often teams up with external developers to lend its 18 years of experience to fledgling companies.



KEY GAME: Shadow Of The Colossus (with Team Ico)



34 Polyphony Digital — 40.4







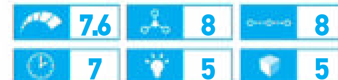


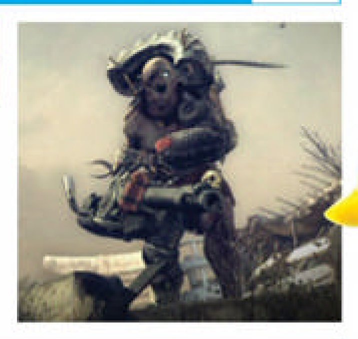
8.4 7 8 6 5 6

Whether you're interested in sim racers or not, you have to respect the fact that no matter what generation of console, Polyphony's *Gran Turismo* is always the best looking game on the system. It takes pride in being at the cutting edge of visual fidelity and it always leads the way.

KEY GAME: Gran Turismo 6

33 id Software 40.6

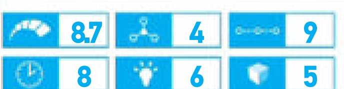


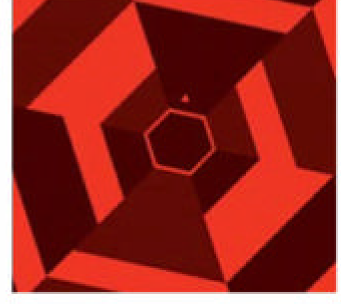


Most of id's good reputation comes from its influential early work like *Doom* and *Quake*, but you have to give some credit to Rage and the id Tech engine. Having spent several years now working on the next *Doom*, id has really raised our expectations. We think we'll see something massive from this legendary team.

KEY GAME: Rage

32 Terry Cavanagh 40.7





As the only solo developer in this list, Cavanagh stands out, but then he should, thanks to titles like *Don't Look Back*, *VVVVVV* and *Super Hexagon*. His work is consistently innovative, creative and subverts the convention of the genres they embrace. His work is small, but perfectly formed and it impresses us time and again.

KEY GAME: Super Hexagon



31 Remedy Entertainment 40.8









If there's one thing we love consistently about Remedy it's the studio's commitment to blending story and gameplay in smart, fun and inventive ways. *Max Payne* did it with a comic style, *Alan Wake* with novelisation, and now *Quantum Break* wants to tackle episodic TV.

KEY GAME: Max Payne

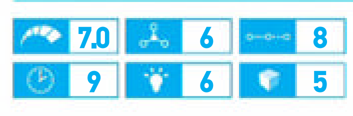
30 Nintendo EAD Tokyo 40.9

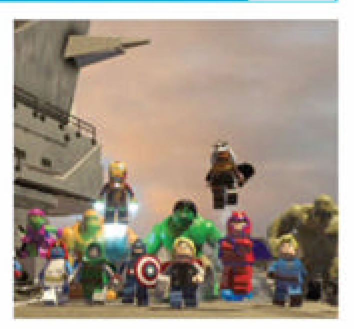


While its more recent output has been (admittedly very well done) remakes of previously popular Nintendo games like *Ocarina Of Time*, the EAD Tokyo team still carries a lot of expectation after producing *Super Mario Galaxy*. Can it be that innovative and groundbreaking again? We hope so.

KEY GAME: Super Mario Galaxy

29 Traveller's Tales 41





A British developer that's been operating since 1990, Traveller's Tales is one of the most successful studios in the world right now: its work on various Lego licences has seen it propelled to the mainstream. The developer is probably the best studio making licensed games right now – what's more, it's making them cool again.

KEY GAME: Lego Marvel Super Heroes

28 Hello Games 41.3

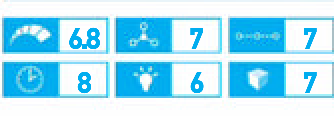
8.3 4 8
8 5 8

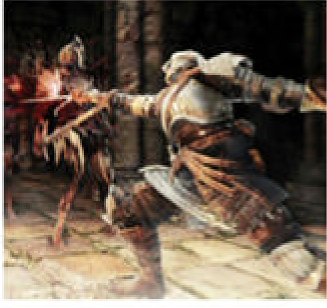


The four-man Guildford team that started Hello Games gave themselves a great base to build on when they created the *Joe Danger* series of action games. Successful and fun on every platform it launched on, *Joe Danger* is the launchpad for this team to build one of the most ambitious games we've ever seen in *No Man's Sky*.

KEY GAME: Joe Danger

27 From Software 41.8

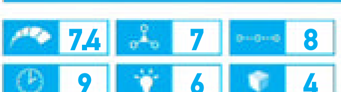


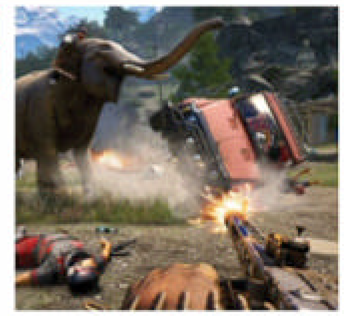


While the average score is dragged down by ten years of *Armored Core* games, From has proven itself as one of the most influential studios in the world after its more recent releases gained their own cult following. *Dark Souls* has already inspired clones, and From's sadistic approach to game design established it as a unique presence.

KEY GAME: Dark Souls II

26 Ubisoft Montreal 41.4

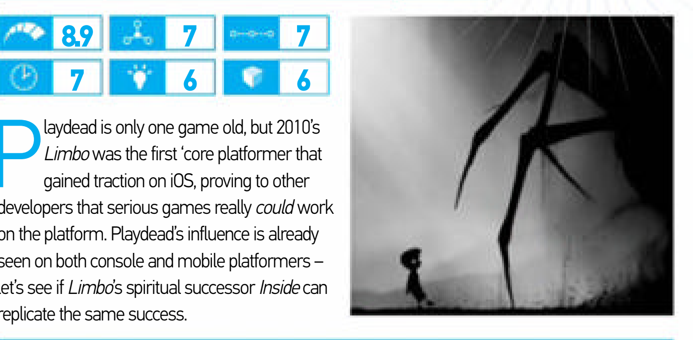




Despite some issues with recent releases – *Assassin's Creed Unity*, for example – Ubisoft Montreal is still worthy of note: the *Far Cry* series is solid, *Watch Dogs* reviewed well and its work with the UbiArt Framework on *Child Of Light* proved it's more than a one-trick pony. We hope the studio recovers from *Unity*'s bad press in time for 2015's *AC*.

KEY GAME: Far Cry 4

25 Playdead 41.9



Playdead is only one game old, but 2010's *Limbo* was the first 'core platformer that gained traction on iOS, proving to other developers that serious games really *could* work on the platform. Playdead's influence is already seen on both console and mobile platformers – let's see if *Limbo*'s spiritual successor *Inside* can replicate the same success.

KEY GAME: Limbo

24 EA DICE 42

8.0	7	7
8	6	6



DICE took a heavy knock from the issues surrounding *Battlefield 4*, but up until that cross-generational launch it had always delivered massive online shooter games with seeming ease. Its commitment to experimentation through games like *Mirror's Edge* also gives it a lot of credit and means *Star Wars: Battlefront* remains a game to watch.

KEY GAME: Battlefield

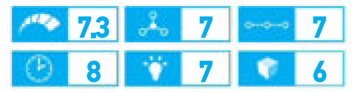
23 Criterion Games 42.1

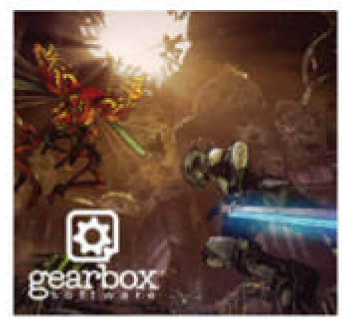
8.1	7	8
7	5	7

Action racers are that great crossover genre that seems to appeal to almost anyone, and in that field Criterion stands as one of the few developers whose output has remained consistently high and packed with new ideas. Stick this developer's name on the box and we're already sold.

KEY GAME: Hot Pursuit

22 Gearbox Software 42.3



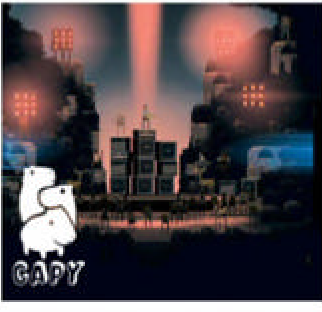


A mottled history prevents Gearbox from climbing higher – *Aliens: Colonial Marines* and *Duke Nukem* against the *Borderlands* series – but studio head Randy Pitchford and his enthusiasm continually allows the developer to bounce back. Genre innovation is Gearbox's strong point, and 2015's *Battleborn* looks set to reinforce that.

KEY GAME: Borderlands 2

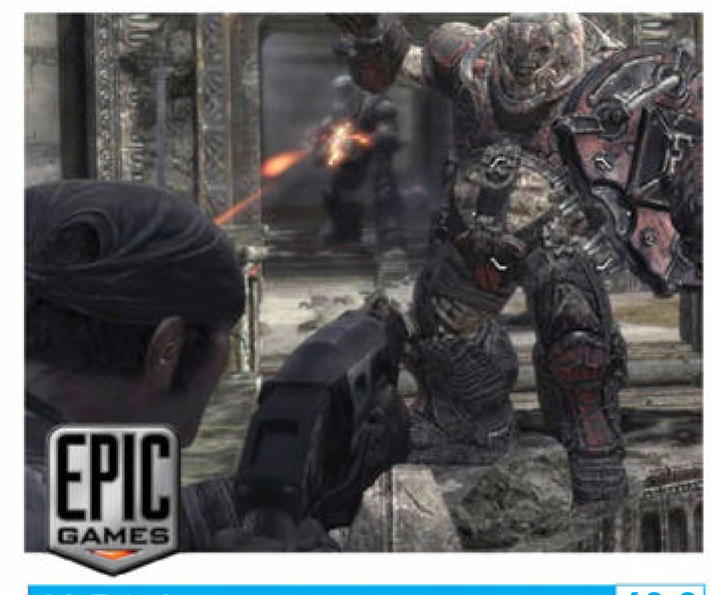
21 Capybara 42.3

7.8 | 6 | 8 | 9 | 7 | 6



One of Canada's oldest indie studios, Capybara is more than just a developer: studio head, Nathan Vella, was instrumental in setting up the Indie Fund – an international publishing initiative. The studio itself excels with modern pixel art games, and its next project *Below* has already grabbed the mainstream's attention, months before launch.

KEY GAME: Superbrothers: Sword & Sorcery EP



20 Epic Games 42.3

8.3 | 7 | 8 | 8 | 6 | 5

Creators of the industry-defining Unreal engine, Epic's developmental duties have taken a backseat to its engine maintenance and upgrading recently. But with the announcement of a new *Unreal Tournament* game last year, and the upcoming *Fornite* set to showcase what Unreal Engine 4 can do, it might be time for Epic to rise like a Fenix from the ashes... (sorry).

KEY GAME: Gears Of War 2

19 Retro Studios 42.9

8.9 | 6 | 9 | 8 | 5 | 6

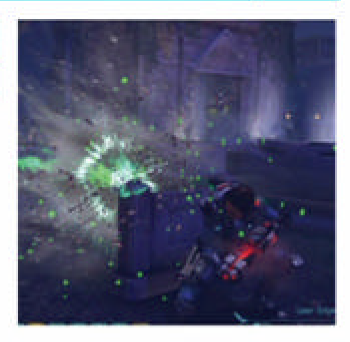
One of the few Western studios trusted by Nintendo to handle its prized franchises, *Metroid Prime* still stands out as a peak moment for the Austin, Texas team. However, its take on *Donkey Kong Country* in recent years has deservedly been praised as it brought new life to another classic.



KEY GAME: Metroid Prime

18 Firaxis Games 43.3

8.3 | 6 | 8 | 9 | 6 | 6



Sid Meier is synonymous with strategy gaming, and his studio's continued work on the genre hasn't seen it lose touch or fail to innovate – last year's *Civilization: Beyond Earth* was a superb new direction for the franchise, and 2012's *XCOM* reboot proved the studio knew *exactly* how to handle RTS games on console too.

KEY GAME: XCOM: Enemy Unknown

17 Ubisoft Montpellier 43.8

7.8 | 6 | 8 | 9 | 7 | 6

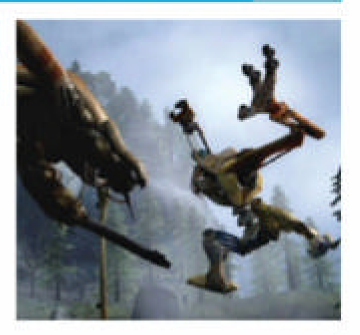
Responsible for the phenomenal 2D engine, UbiArt Framework, Ubisoft Montpellier is effectively the 'indie arm' of Ubisoft. After releasing *Valiant Hearts* last year, the studio is currently rumoured to be working on a *Prince Of Persia* remake (which would be amazing in 2D) or a project based on Ubisoft's dormant IP *Beyond Good & Evil*.



KEY GAME: Rayman Legends

16 Valve Corporation 44.5

8.5	9	8
4	8	7

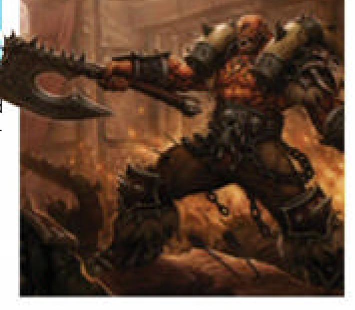


Aside from owning the biggest digital distribution platform the world has ever seen, Valve is also responsible for *Half-Life*, *Team Fortress*, *Left 4 Dead* and *Portal* – some of the most influential and innovative games of the last decade. If we see *Half-Life 3* (finally) announced this year, expect the internet to actually implode.

KEY GAME: Half-Life 2

15 Blizzard Entertainment 44.8

8.8	8	9
8	5	6



Just when you might have thought Blizzard was slipping away from its place of power it delivers *Diablo III* to blow away the console crowd, *Hearthstone* to reinvigorate the trading card game genre and then brings *World Of Warcraft* back to top form with *Warlords Of Draenor*. The last year has seen Blizzard regain its place on the world. Bring on *Overwatch*.

KEY GAME: World Of Warcraft

14 Mojang 44.9

7.9	9	8	7	6	7







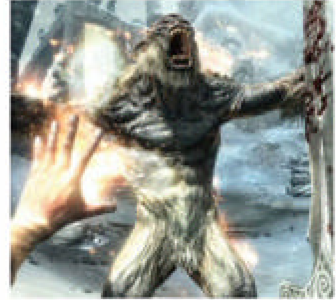


The impact of *Minecraft* on the games industry has been seismic. So large in fact that we could hardly expect Mojang to repeat it with its following games, but that doesn't mean we're not paying close attention to *Scrolls* and *Cobalt*. Every move Mojang makes, now under Microsoft, will be scrutinised and analysed in great depth. Really its biggest moves will be in how *Minecraft* continues to evolve and spread across platforms.

KEY GAME: Minecraft

13 Bethesda Game Studios 44.9

7.9	8	8
6	6	7



Ever since *Oblivion* released last-gen, Bethesda has continued to really impress. The studio's ability to craft believable, intricate worlds is matched only by its familiarity with environmental storytelling. *Skyrim* still inspires hundreds of mods a year, and the rumour mill surrounding *Fallout 4* never slows down – a testament to the series' popularity.

KEY GAME: Skyrim

12 Kojima Productions 44.9

7.9	8	8
8	6	7

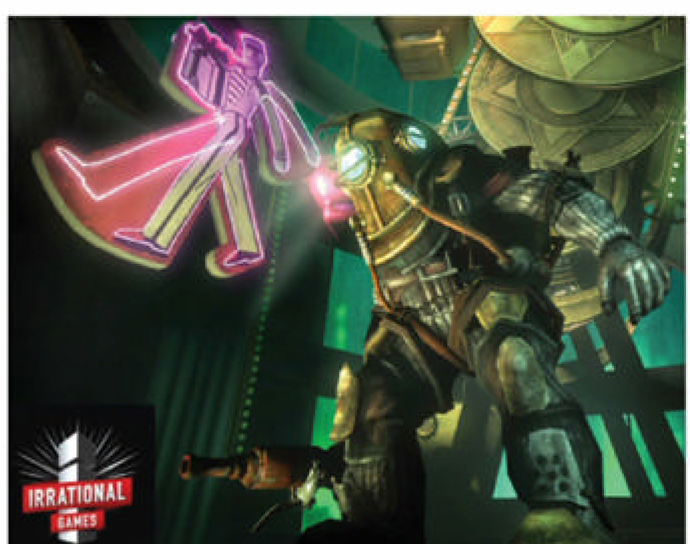


Like him or not, you can't dispute Kojima's impact on games. Operating since the Eighties, Kojima has constantly allowed his personal influences to shape the games he makes. Publisher Konami has had the good sense to fund him and allow him to continually innovate within the action stealth genre. *The Phantom Pain* could well be his tour de force.

KEY GAME: Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots

11 Irrational Games 45.2

8.2	8	8	7	7	7



Ken Levine's Irrational team doesn't produce masses of games, but when it does put something out, it has something about it that feels entirely new. *System Shock*, *SWAT 4*, *BioShock* and *BioShock Infinite* have all proved that this is a studio committed to breaking new ground as often as possible. Now reduced in size, we're hoping to see a Double Fine-style boost in smaller, but more frequent, titles of equal innovative spirit.

KEY GAME: BioShock



10 Rockstead Studios 45.4

8.4	8	9	7	5	8

It was the franchise developers weren't supposed to be able to get right. Batman was dead as a concept and yet Rocksteady pulled it off and even repeated the trick with a sequel. Now rounding off its trilogy, the London-based developer could probably have its pick of projects with Warner Bros. Its delivery of tight action mechanics and superb character design has rightly earned it a place among the top developers in the world and its facilities in London are apparently attracting a lot of interest from other teams. The key to Rocksteady's success has been finding a way to balance sandbox exploration with a consistent narrative through-line. Many teams have played in these waters and found them challenging to get right, but the *Arkham* team seems to be on the right track as it finalises its most ambitious project to date. Where it goes from here will be something we're all excited to see.

KEY GAME: Arkham Asylum



9 Double Fine Productions 45.9

7.6	7	8	9	7	7

As we crunched the numbers, we were surprised to see Double Fine rise up this list, but when you consider the way Tim Schafer's team has reinvented itself as a digital developer, making smaller, more focused games and releasing them frequently, it all makes sense. Since *Costume Quest* in 2010, Double Fine has put out game after game of stripped-back genre experimentation and it's rarely dropped the ball in that time. Plus, it always has that little DF humour twist. The likes of *Psychonauts* and *Brütal Legend* have given this team a strong fan base to build from on top of Schafer's work on *Grim Fandango* and *Monkey Island*. Now titles like *Stacking* and *Broken Age* are leading the way for this incredibly creative San Francisco team. With regular, off-project, creative weeks now part of Double Fine's working practices, the new ideas just keep on coming.

KEY GAME: Broken Age

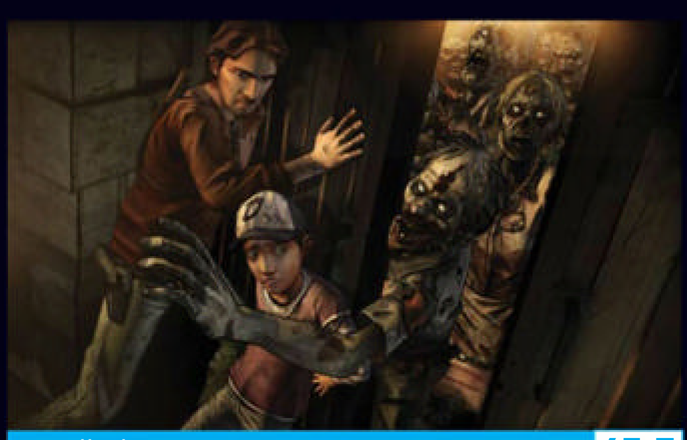


8 Bungie 45.6

8.6	9	7	7	7	6

Bungie single-handedly changed the way FPS games were made back when it released *Halo* on the Xbox, and last year the Seattle-based studio did it again with *Destiny*. Still drawing in an average of 3.5 million players *a day*, *Destiny* proves that current-gen can and will support shared world MMO-lite type games. Bungie lost its musical maestro Marty O'Donnell last year, but that won't hold it back – with more *Destiny* expansions planned, the studio's partnership with Activision has only just begun to pay off and the ten-year plan for *Destiny* is in its earliest stages of development. Whether that plan involves an escalation of events and DLC over the next few years is unknown, but seems likely. On the other hand, the possibility of spinning out an improved sequel also seems like a strong prospect as fans and Bungie alike can now see the strengths and weaknesses of this ambitious shooter in action.

KEY GAME: Destiny



7 Telltale Games 45.7

7.7	8	8	9	7	6

Telltale has been making episodic games since 2004, but since the studio released *The Walking Dead* in 2012, it's gone from strength to strength, applying its narrative formula to licences from *Borderlands* to *The Wolf Among Us*. Telltale has proved to the mainstream that games are capable of mature, emotional narratives that offer an agency otherwise unavailable. The studio has also pioneered episodic gaming – succeeding where others failed – influencing the entire industry's marketing tactics as a result. You need only look at the way *Resident Evil Revelations 2* or *Fable Legends* are being delivered to see Telltale is proof to the idea that episodic releases can work. Its most celebrated release however remains *The Walking Dead* for its balance of narrative and player involvement. By making its choices grey it gave great weight to every decision. Many could learn from it.

KEY GAME: The Walking Dead

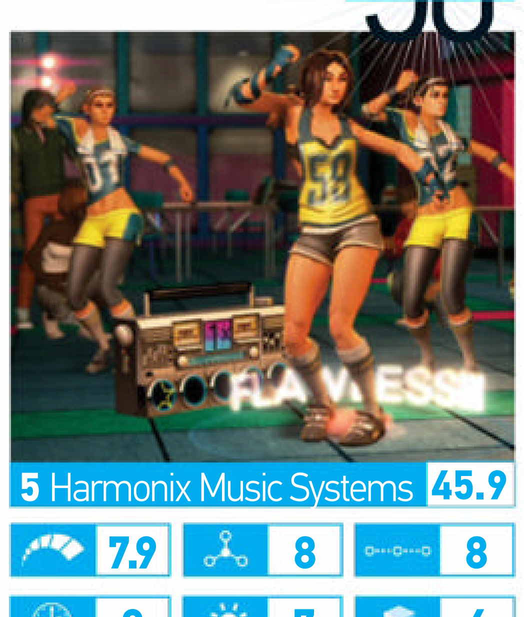


6 BioWare 45.8

7.8	9	8
8	7	6

BioWare's 20-year history has shown that the company can not only create some of the most interesting and deep characters in gaming, but also that it can craft worlds unlike any other. *Mass Effect* is arguably this generation's *Star Wars*, and the *Dragon Age* games are the best in the fantasy-RPG class. Even after the founding doctors of the studio left, BioWare has proved resilient: a new *Dragon Age* game won over critics last year, and an upcoming *Star Wars* RPG and *Mass Effect 4* promise to keep RPG fans ticking over for a good few years.

KEY GAME: Mass Effect 2

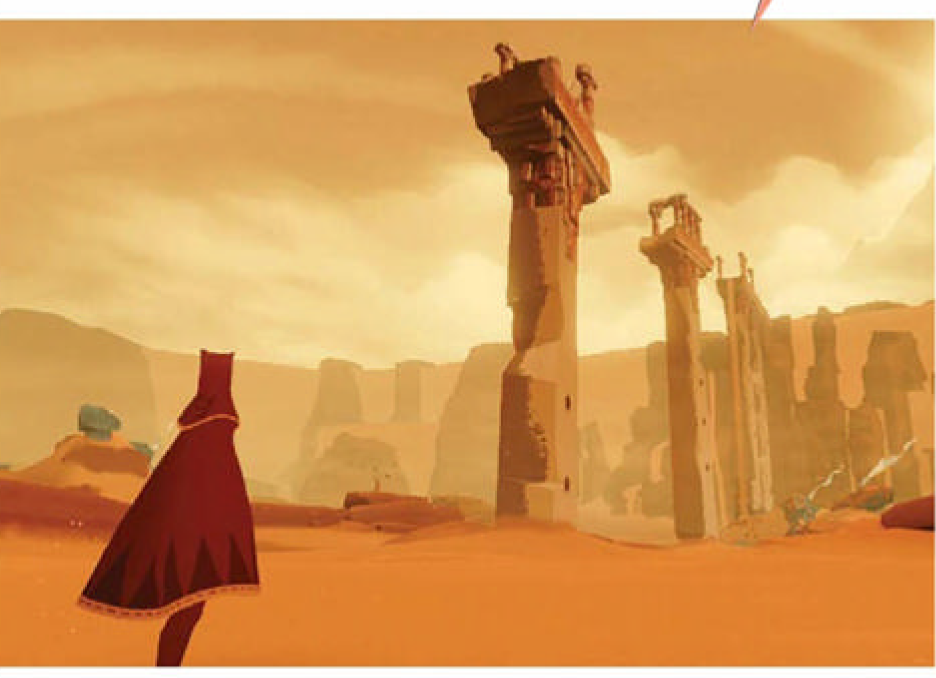


5 Harmonix Music Systems 45.9

7.9	8	8
9	7	6

It takes a brave developer to stand against the tidal wave of hardcore gamer opinion and say, 'You're wrong, this technology has merit'. After gaining a great deal of credibility for *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*, all could have been lost with the launch of *Dance Central* and its backing of Kinect, but in the end it only helped to prove how committed and creative this studio can be. Microsoft may have all but abandoned motion gaming by releasing the Xbox One without Kinect and gradually replacing its voice commands for navigating the console's interface, but Harmonix continues to do amazing work in the field again and again. Its most recent example of this was with *Disney's Fantasia: Music Evolved*. It was quintessential Harmonix, blending a love of music with innovative controls and dazzling, often abstract, visuals. What the future will hold for this team now that Kinect appears to be fading away will be interesting to see. We're hoping for *Rock Band 4*.

KEY GAME: Dance Central





4 Thatgamecompany 46.4

8.4	6	9
7	9	8

With a new game every three years or so, we're looking forward to having something new from thatgamecompany in 2015, and after seeing it evolve from *Flow* to *Journey*, something amazing could be in store. What this studio does beautifully is take a core theme and deliver it as an experience. *Flower* for instance was about evoking emotion without competitiveness, while *Journey* was about the loneliness and isolation of exploration, making players feel small. *Journey* was really the biggest thing it had done, offering the kind of adventure experience in a relatively linear structure that few get away with in our sandbox-centric times. The mixture of melancholy in *Journey's* darker moments with the exhilaration of others took players on an emotional trip through a world without text or speech that you could understand. It was a remarkable piece of work and whatever thatgamecompany tries next deserves a lot of attention.

KEY GAME: Journey

3 Naughty Dog 47.9

Avg. Score	7
Influence	7
Consistency	9
Regularity	8
Innovation	7
Cool factor	8

Naughty Dog has always pushed the boundaries of the hardware it's worked on. During the PS2 era, the *Jak & Daxter* series discovered a maturing audience of platform gamers. During the PS3's lifetime, the *Uncharted* games were peerless cinematic action adventures. Then came *The Last Of Us* – a master class in interactive narrative, a graphical masterpiece, a game to be enjoyed by everyone. Naughty Dog continues to push the boundaries of what we can expect from gaming, and does it all so seemingly effortlessly. From concept art to glitchless, polished final products, Naughty Dog excels. Though it lost writer Amy Hennig, director Justin Richmond and lead artist Nate Wells last year, Naughty Dog rolls with the punches, and will undoubtedly launch *Uncharted 4* to critical acclaim later this year.

KEY GAME: The Last Of Us

2 Media Molecule 48.1

Avg. Score	9.1
Influence	7
Consistency	9
Regularity	8
Innovation	9
Cool factor	7

Media Molecule is one of the most unique developers you could ever wish to meet. The team is largely young, artistic in their interests and not short of whimsy. All of these qualities are fairly apparent just from the titles it has put out, *LittleBigPlanet* being the best example.

But what Media Molecule has actually achieved with Sackboy and his world of creative possibilities has empowered gamers and demystified games development for a whole new generation. As we enter the age of Raspberry Pi coding being used in schools, and *Minecraft* takes over the world with its crafting tools, some credit has to pass to Media Molecule for proving the concept. This is simply one of the most creative and imaginative development teams on the planet.

KEY GAME: LittleBigPlanet 2





1 Rockstar North 52

Avg. Score	9.0	Influence	9
Consistency	9	Regularity	8
Innovation	8	Cool factor	9

Rockstar was really the obvious number one. But it does not claim that place here because of sales or popularity. It's here on the merit of its output. Rockstar North is a team that always seeks to turn the rules on their head. It provokes debate and controversy. It challenges ideas and satirises modern life. Most importantly of all, it produces some stunning experiences, writ large over hours of gameplay in massive environments with wonderful levels of detail. And you need only look at the way the rest of the industry has grown and developed since the release of *GTA III* to see its singular vision trickle down. 3D action games of every stripe now lean on *GTA*'s template.

Open-world games must follow the sandbox rules Rockstar developed. And as the years have gone by we've enjoyed watching those principles polished and refined into *Red Dead Redemption*, *GTA IV* and finally *Grand Theft Auto V*. You need only look at the scope of its most recent game to appreciate just how far it pushes itself. The racing, heists, sandbox exploration and Hollywood-esque action setpieces could each in their own way have supported single games on their own. That they all exist together in one place, so well balanced, is a credit to Rockstar North. It is simply the very best out there.

KEY GAME: Grand Theft Auto V



As Valve's power base continues to grow and with new consoles looking to bring Steam into the living room, we ask

Has Steam become too powerful?

FULL STEAM AHEAD

We've never really had much cause to question Valve's distribution service until recent months. Its large catalogue of games, frequent sales and support for indie developers has made it an increasingly attractive place for game makers and players to call home. The influence of Steam could even be argued to have had an impact on the self-publishing platforms put in place for PS4 and Xbox One in the last 18 months. Valve has always been a trendsetter and an innovator, but with Steam it has become a powerhouse of publishing and as such it seems only right that we begin to scrutinise that power.

"When someone becomes very powerful in relation to the others in any market, it's cause for caution," Image & Form CEO Brjann Sigurgeirsson tells us. "I believe Steam is in a position now where they could rewrite the market rules entirely." Certainly it's big enough to be gaining the attention of the European Union, which will be looking to enforce a 14-day refund policy on Steam as of the start of 2015. It was reported last August that Australia might look to enforce a similar policy in the coming months. This has lead to concern that prices may be raised to compensate, but Sigurgeirsson thinks the upcoming changes could be even more drastic.

"Say that they, for example, decided to change their business model from their current one to a subscription-based one," he suggests. "Depending on what algorithm they'd implement for reimbursing publishers, we'd see substantial changes in game development: if it were to reward the number of game sessions, we'd have a sharp increase in casual-type games on Steam. If it instead rewarded accumulated playtime, we'd see more grinding games. I think it would be detrimental to the gaming ecosystem, so I think they're good where they are."

There's been no indication that this could be the case, of course, purely some informed speculation on the part of an experienced developer, but the picture it paints is of a company that can have a huge impact on the gaming landscape with every move it makes. The ripples of a change or decision on Steam stretch far and wide.

The darker side of this became apparent late last year as *Hatred* was launched on Steam's popular and lauded Greenlight service, pulled by Valve and then reinstated with an apology from Gabe Newell himself. It was a confusing week that saw the admittedly controversial »

Hatred thrown from vilified example of the ills of game making to the champion of free expression standing up to corporate censorship. When *Hatred* was announced it certainly raised some eyebrows and some may even have felt that the decision to pull Steam support was the correct one for the image of the platform, but Newell's statement to developer Destructive Creations has some worrying admissions for the transparency of approval decisions at Valve.

"Yesterday I heard that we were taking *Hatred* down from Greenlight," Newell said in his apology, shared by Destructive Creations on its Facebook page. "Since I wasn't up to speed, I asked around internally to find out why we had done that. It turns out that it wasn't a good decision, and we'll be putting *Hatred* back up. My apologies to you and your team. Steam is about creating tools for content creators and customers." But doesn't that suggest that the rules and criteria for assessing games on Steam are unclear?

"It used to be pretty simple," Mike Maulbeck, developer of *Paranautical Activity* explains to us. "You'd email Valve your game and in a few days they'd either roll out the red carpet or they'd shoot you down and tell you why they didn't want to distribute the game. Now you put your game on Greenlight, beg and hope for votes, and then wait to get greenlit. A process that is less democratic than it seems, as many games sit in the top 10 for months while some games are greenlit without even hitting the top 100. Not to mention games like *Soda Drinker Pro*, some sexually explicit games, and *Hatred* being taken down with no explanation regardless of having paid the hundred fucking dollar fee and receiving positive feedback."

Maulbeck has very publicly had run-ins with Steam, Valve and Gabe Newell in the last year. In an episode in which Maulbeck admitted to us he had made "a fool of myself", he tweeted a threat to kill Gabe Newell after a protracted and confusing process of publishing Code Avarice's *Paranautical Activity*. It saw Valve pull the game from Steam entirely and refuse to work with Code Avarice again, and led to Maulbeck's resignation (although he returned to the team in November with the support of the studio). As Maulbeck recounts the whole affair it's clear he still feels a great deal of anger about what he sees as a confused and contradictory process.

"I put my game *Paranautical Activity* on Greenlight, a few months later Adult Swim offered to publish us, so we ignored the Greenlight campaign and started working with them," Maulbeck begins telling us. "Adult Swim pitches the game to Valve, Valve says Adult Swim can't publish *Paranautical Activity* onto Steam because they 'don't want to send the message that developers can use publishers to get around the Greenlight system'." While that seems fairly reasonable, looking to protect the integrity of the service and the values of consumer-driven, meritorious publishing, it does appear to be punishing a developer for making a game that was attractive enough to garner publisher attention. The tale didn't end there though.

"Eventually we get greenlit on our own and make it onto Steam Early Access," Maulbeck continues. "In the first hour on Steam, we make more money than the previous six months being on every distribution platform we could find. Once we're finally ready to release the full version, we find out Steam doesn't allow us to



"Everything exists to reinforce its stranglehold on the PC market"



release on nights or weekends, so we postponed our release date to compensate, and when the time finally comes they don't properly mark the game as fully released."

It was at this point that the accumulated frustration came out in a torrent on Twitter from Maulbeck and led to his now infamous attack on the Valve chief. While the ultimate end of this episode cannot be justified, it's clear to see from this story how some of Steam's processes and policies might confuse and infuriate developers just trying to

● The arrival of the Steam Machines later this year is going to put Steam in direct competition for gamers' living room time with Xbox and PlayStation.



get their games out to the biggest audience possible. Failure on Steam can feel like a body blow and anything that stalls or hinders your chances of being seen by the Steam community can be catastrophic.



"Steam is this incredibly perfect system where everything exists to reinforce its stranglehold on the PC market," claims Maulbeck. "A downloadable client, which is required to install and play any of your games. A client that pushes crazy sales every few months to make sure that you have as many games as possible in your Steam library so cutting the cord is as hard and painful as possible. An integrated friends list, which is required to link up with your friends in many games, and hell, probably is the only contact you have for a lot of your online friends. You're rewarded with cards by playing your games on Steam, which can be redeemed to get cash off games, or personalise your account and 'level up', both of which serve only to deepen your investment and dependency on Steam.

"They're even forcing indie devs to drive traffic to Steam. A dev can't just release onto Steam and promote whatever platform gives them the best revenue share, first they need to beg all their fans to go vote on Greenlight, which of course requires a Steam account. I feel like a conspiracy nut talking about all this stuff, but this kinda thing doesn't happen by accident. Valve are smart. They know exactly what they're doing."

This obviously implies a quite deliberate policy of controlling the market and building the Steam powerbase, which is no great surprise. But not everyone looks upon these structures as negative. "Steam is by far the best network I distribute through," Sean Edwards, Shovsoft founder and lead developer, insists to us. "Being able to distribute Steam keys through other vendors as well makes the whole process of keeping the game updated through one source a godsend. Having to create multiple builds and Installers for other stores every time a patch is rolled out is time consuming and sometimes not worth the effort given the small amount of revenue."

Chris McQuinn, designer at *Guacamelee* developer Drinkbox agrees. "One of the pros we'd list as a studio is that Steam is incredibly transparent, and more than anything, it's sensible. It allows us to log on immediately and see our sales for the day, change prices, and do anything we want. It's so easy to use."



● Valve has built up its reputation by delivering innovative games like *Half-Life 2* and *Left 4 Dead*.



● *Paranautical Activity* is no longer available on Steam, but can be found at codeavarice.com

"It's more straightforward than the traditional console platforms, and less straightforward than mobile platforms," Sigurgeirsson adds. "On the other hand, on mobile you have very little contact with the platform owners, since you do everything yourself. I'd say it's a scale with mobiles at one end where everything from deployment to sales tracking is automated, with perhaps Nintendo at the other end of the spectrum, where many things are cumbersome but you instead have splendid individuals helping you out." »



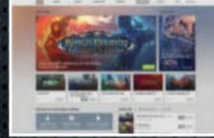
ALTERNATIVES TO STEAM

The challengers to Valve's growing network



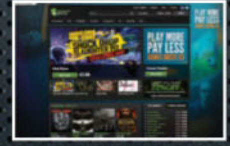
ITCH.IO

● With no upfront cost for uploading your own games and a 10 per cent cut for itch.io for each game sold, this is a great place for indies who are looking to launch but don't have the cash to pay for hosting on other platforms. And if you want, you can pay a little extra to help the developer.



GOG.COM

● This is probably the closest competitor to Steam at present; as a subsidiary of CD Projekt it has the same developer background and affinity with gamers that Valve has too. Regular sales and support as well as a commitment to DRM-free files make it an attractive alternative.



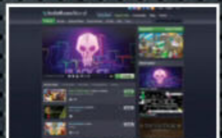
GREEN MAN GAMING

● UK-based, but doing most of its business outside, Green Man Gaming has a catalogue of over 5,200, including titles on console as well as PC, Mac and Linux. Its integration with Playfire means gamers can track all their achievements in one place.



DESURA

● As another indie-focused network, Desura is all about giving as much control as possible to developers. Pre-release promotion, price control, auto-patching and much more, including offering keys for Steam and GOG if they want. And pricing wise, it's pretty competitive for gamers too.



INDIE GAME STAND

● This is more of a curated service. With two new indie games launched each week and a pay-what-you-want model, Indie Game Stand is a great way to get exposure for developers, if not necessarily as financially lucrative. It has a strong commitment to charity.



HUMBLE BUNDLE

● In terms of attracting attention, the combination of pay-what-you-like, incentives for paying a little more and the ability for gamers to pick how their money is distributed was a marketing masterstroke, and meant that the Humble Bundle became a very influential platform.

» Sigurgeirsson's Image & Form have seen success and failure with Steam having had iOS success *Anthill* rejected by the platform and later seeing great results from *SteamWorld Dig* on the service. As such Sigurgeirsson has quite a balanced view on the good and bad of the services Steam provides. "I believe we've been really lucky with our personal contact at Valve, and that this is a key factor to having a good experience on Steam," he tells us. "He's very quick to answer e-mails, reasons with us and suggests what we should do and how we should do it. He's also frank when delivering letdowns. At one point I was asking for a Daily Deal, and he told me that unfortunately *Dig* hadn't reached the sales levels yet at that point. I was quite saddened and thought the door had closed, but as sales continued we reached a point where we qualified. I've heard from others with managers that don't seem that interested, which obviously must be very frustrating: you think that you've got it made, and then very little happens."

Clearly the latter was much more like Maulbeck's experience. "The interface is horrible and over-complicated on the developer side, they're slow to respond to questions/complaints, things frequently break or don't work right, to which you will either get no response or they'll just tell you not to use whatever you're trying to use that's broken," he reveals. "They make decisions seemingly at random. Every decision more idiotic and contradictory than the last. A game gets a publisher to avoid the slog that is Greenlight? Don't let the publisher put the game onto Steam even though they've published dozens of games onto the platform before because they don't want publishers using Greenlight to 'prey' on indies."

At the other end of the spectrum, Edwards feels things have been improved greatly since his earlier Steam experiences. "In 2012 when I first put *Lunar Flight* on Steam I had to upload new builds to an FTP and send a tech support email to have it updated. Likewise for any store page changes I had to request them. Since then Valve has improved the pipeline significantly putting all the controls of the store page in the hands of the developers through the Steamworks web portal. Likewise uploading builds now uses 'Steampipe' which automatically creates and uploads an update reducing patch file sizes."

"Steam is huge, only a small percentage of the audience needs to like your game for you to do all right," Sigurgeirsson reminds us, but there are some peculiarities of the Steam audience you have to contend with too. "On the whole, Steam consumers *will* wait out your game until it's on sale. They have gotten used to it and know that very soon after release they won't have to pay top dollar for a game. They don't have to, since many of them have already bought more games than they'll be able to finish during their lifetimes. That means that some time after release, when the diehard fans have picked it up, your game will more or less flatline between sales."

So, it's a platform you have to be on as a developer; in some respects a holy grail, but simply publishing on Steam isn't the end of the journey. There are hurdles to leap, contradictions to navigate and winds of change that may make it an unpredictable place to publish. Steam can have a huge impact on a game, and it wields a huge amount of power, but that brings us back to the key question: is it too powerful?

"There's no question that Steam is too powerful," Code Avarice's Maulbeck responds. "It's impossible to not use Steam as a professional developer, and damn near impossible not to use it as a player." However, Image & Form's Sigurgeirsson thinks Steam is a power, but not one that's looking to create a monopoly. "They've carved out a (very big) niche for themselves, and even other players on the same platform, such as GOG and Humble Store, can co-exist with them," he tells us. And Edwards feels if it's become a powerhouse, it's a well-deserved position. "It certainly has a huge loyal user base and I believe that is due to the respect they have earned as a company. If Valve ever sold out to another company with different values then I think it would be something to be concerned about."

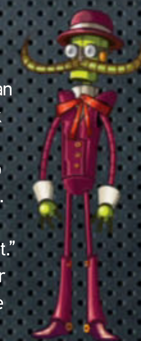


"Steam is incredibly transparent, and more than anything, it's sensible"



McQuinn has a more pragmatic view of Steam's increasing power and influence. "Steam is a company, so ultimately they can do what they want. People might not think some of the things they do are fair, but we didn't vote Steam in – they're a privately-owned company, and there are alternatives, so if people don't like what they're doing they're free to go elsewhere. Everyone's allowed to draw the line in the sand, and we're free to criticise where that is, but it's ultimately Steam's choice. That's that."

As McQuinn points out, Steam isn't the only option out there for PC developers or consumers, though, as a number of competitive options have emerged in recent years. "Humble shows the most







STEAM'S STUNNING STATS

AFTER FEWER THAN FIVE YEARS, STEAM IS ALREADY RACKING UP IMPRESSIVE FIGURES

100 MILLION
ACTIVE ACCOUNTS

OVER **3,700** GAMES

1 JAN 2015
8,466,190
USERS ONLINE

77.8%
OF BOUGHT GAMES ARE PLAYED

22.2%
GAMES UNPLAYED

42.7%
BOUGHT GAMES REACH 50-60% COMPLETION

PROFIT MARGINS FOR GAME MAKERS
*according to VideoGameDesignSchools.org



PRODUCER — STEAM — STEAM

MOST-OWNED GAMES

DOTA 2	25.93 MILLION	DAY OF DEFEAT	6.73
TEAM FORTRESS 2	20.3	DEATHMATCH CLASSIC	6.65
HALF-LIFE 2: LOST COAST	12.77	RICOCHET	6.64
COUNTER-STRIKE: SOURCE	11.99	THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM	5.94
HALF-LIFE 2: DEATHMATCH	11.02	COUNTER-STRIKE: GO	5.89
LEFT 4 DEAD 2	10.71	SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION V	5.84
COUNTER-STRIKE	9.78	DAY OF DEFEAT: SOURCE	5.63
HALF-LIFE 2	8.05	GARRY'S MOD	5.35
PORTAL	7.36	PORTAL 2	4.88
COUNTER-STRIKE: COND. ZERO	7.19	HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE ONE	4.81

72%
OF US HOUSEHOLDS PLAY PC GAMES

EST.
4,748,797
CONNECTED PLAYERS ON STEAM EVERY DAY

solid numbers of any non-Steam I've worked with, and they've got those super lucrative bundles every now and then," Maulbeck tells us. "I find loads of people use itch.io to donate to developers, paying *way* over the cost of the game. They're insanely easy to work with, too. I've heard GOG is Steam's strongest competition sales wise, but I can't speak to the validity of that since I've never worked with them. Really you should try and get your game on as many storefronts as possible. Pretty much no matter where you go you're not gonna sell nothing, so they're all worth working with." Certainly Humble has proven to be very attractive to consumers, offering great value bundles of classic or Indie games that can compete with the regular Steam sales and GOG is looking to offer similar bargains on a regular basis, drawing in more interest.

Lunar Flight developer Edwards doesn't seem to feel the alternatives are as attractive as a developer though. "There are a quite a few other Online Stores but none of them have the same market share that Steam has. As an indie developer with a 'niche' title like *Lunar Flight*, Steam is the only one that makes decent revenue. In fact 95 per cent of the revenue [has been] from Steam and it is available from around ten different online stores.

"A large part the reason people only want to use Steam is because they have accumulated a large library of software," Edwards continues. "Many people feel having multiple Digital Store clients like Origin and Uplay is inconvenient. Steam also has very good social community integration and I doubt any competitors will be able to attract people away from where their friends are."

For Sigurgeirsson, it's all about finding a place where you can stand out from the competition, whether that's on PC, mobile or somewhere else. "As a former mobile-only developer frustrated with the congestion and the race to the bottom, I didn't view Steam as the monster to flee from. Two years ago, people were sceptical when we told them that we were making a game for the Nintendo 3DS, but I reckoned it was better to be a growing fish in a small pond rather than starving to death in a red ocean. We weren't making money on mobile, and neither were most of the others. I didn't see the 3DS as "our" platform either: as long as we made good games we would have ample space to release to other platforms as well. One successful release often leads to another, and that's how I plan to continue."

On the whole, Steam seems to be doing most things right. Greenlight is giving developers a chance by letting the community decide if they're worth supporting, it's introducing indie studios on an equal footing to the big publishers and it rewards developers with a good cut of the sales from games on the platform. But, the process of approving and rejecting games is clearly still not clear. That Newell had to step in to revive *Hatred*'s Greenlight campaign is evidence enough of that and as the platform becomes larger and moves into the living room with Steam Machines this year there's only going to be greater scrutiny on Valve's policies and processes. Valve hasn't had the experience as a service provider that the likes of Microsoft or Sony have over the years, but it's managed to become a massive player in a short time all the same and maintained the respect and admiration of gamers too. How it uses that influence in the coming months and years is going to be very interesting to see as the possibility for more controversies like those discussed will likely increase.



● Having its own distribution has lead to experiments like making *Team Fortress 2* free.



● *SteamWorld Dig* from Image & Form has done well, but it's not always been so successful.



LEAGUE OF

It doesn't get the attention of Call Of Duty or even World Of Warcraft, so how did Riot's MOBA phenomenon become the most played game on the planet?

In December 2014, 27 million people watched the *League Of Legends* finals in Seoul. That's more than the number of people that watched the World Series and yet, *LOL* doesn't get the attention of its gaming counterparts. It doesn't top the trending topics on most websites and it rarely made headlines until it started breaking records. Quietly, somehow, *League Of Legends* has become the most played game on the planet and is leading the charge in a pro gaming revolution that could well see eSports lifted to the heights of international recognition. So, how did it go from zero to over 70 million players and what does the future hold?

Those are the questions we went into as we began looking at *League Of Legends* again. As we approach what feels like a new tipping point for this extraordinary gaming phenomenon, we felt compelled to turn to those who know *League Of Legends* best of all (perhaps even better than its own developer Riot does), the pro gamers who are pushing it onto the world stage.

"League Of Legends evolves from a mass brawl into something far more tactical and precise"

"*League Of Legends* has a low skill floor, which means that the knowledge and skill required to start playing the game is quite low, but also a high skill ceiling, meaning that there is a huge margin for progression for players to undertake," British-born »



LEGENDS

THE BLOCKBUSTER IN THE SHADOWS



» Jamie 'Tundra' Duthie from FM-eSports explains to us. "Because of this, the game caters to the casual players who are just looking for a fun game here and there and can easily pick up the game and start playing, but also to the aspiring professional players who wish to learn the finer, more intricate details of the game."

That kind of hidden depth is exactly the kind of thing that helped the likes of *World Of Warcraft* rise to the top of the MMO world, offering the surface-level satisfaction that has allowed *LOL* to be a casual hang-out while also delivering longer-term objectives and challenges for those with more inquisitive and combative personalities. What's more, there's so much room for self-expression, with well over 100 Champions to pick from, ranging across six different role types from Tank to Assassin to Support. So there's space to explore play-styles and push at the edges of the slight variations you might find between one Mage or another. It's the kind of depth of character variation that gets players hooked on games like *Street Fighter* too. Delving into the mechanics, becoming obsessed by frame rates, or in the case of *LOL* things like cooldowns on abilities, becomes a part of what makes the game fun. And as that happens, *League Of Legends* evolves from a mass brawl into something more tactical and precise.

That low to high-end approach applies to more than just skill levels as another of the UK's few pro players, the now retired Stephen 'Snoopeh' Ellis reveals, "The fact that it's also free-to-play, with low system requirements allowed it to appeal to a much wider audience than traditional business models." And again, we can't help but see the similarities with the rise and continued popularity of Blizzard's MMO. In an industry where graphical fidelity can really make or break a game's reputation among critics and the gaming public, the potential to be universally playable – for graphics to be utilitarian rather than technologically advanced – is often overlooked and a choice worthy of praise. It's really helped *League Of Legends* find a footing around the world with so many varied internet speeds and average hardware specs. According to Ellis though, it's not been all smooth sailing for Riot as it had to gradually find its place: "Riot initially struggled to capitalise on its global presence as they partnered up with other publishers. However in the past few years, they have taken much more control themselves (a huge investment). But it's very noticeable amidst the community how much Riot invests in the players outside of just North America."

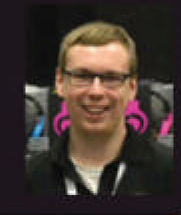
Certainly one of the big reasons why *LOL* is producing such impressive numbers (over 70 million registered players, 32 million active each month, 12 million playing a day and so on), is the way it has been embraced in South Korea and China. That in turn has been associated with the way in which eSports has been embraced and taken so much more seriously in the Far East. For all that Riot Games has invested in its community, it was the players who identified *League Of Legends* as a serious pro gaming contender and it was these gamers and their massive sponsors in the East that propelled it to the world stage. The rest of the world has been catching up ever since.

"Up until 2014, it was only South Korea and China who were giving the respect that *League Of Legends* and eSports deserved," Duthie tells us. "However towards the end of 2014 and heading into 2015, Western society is beginning to accept eSports and detach the negative social stigma associated with the 'typical basement nerd'."

As much as we would like to believe such sentiments have more or less passed by now, the fact is that most of the big headline-grabbing moments in *League Of Legends* have often been reported by mainstream media with a not-so-veiled undercurrent of cynicism and superiority. Perhaps in the early days it had something to do with that aforementioned low-skill entry level or the game being free-to-play (a phrase that sets off alarm bells for many), but it could just be a generational split. The gaming

■ The release of the Champion Jinx marked the first time that a music video and song had been written for Riot. The company released a full music album themed on other Champions in 2014 that is available for purchase.

"You only need to see the takeover of Twitch by Amazon for $970 million to see that something massive has been building in the background"



Pro Gamer Tip

WHO TO WATCH

"The best western streamers in terms of teaching the game are: Froggen, Wingsofdeathx, Bjergsen and Krepo. For entertainment but also a still high level of play, imaqtpie, Trick2g and Cowsep are great people to watch." – Jamie 'Tundra' Duthie from FM-eSports

Pro Gamer Tip

IDENTIFY YOUR STYLE

"Figure out what kind of player you are first. Play lots of solo queue and watch tons of league to figure out what you're good at and increase your understanding of the game. If you're really just starting out, try playing with friends first!" – Seb 'Numlocked' Barton

landscape is changing fast and a new understanding of the social standing of gaming may be emerging.

"There will obviously continue to be stigma attached to gaming and competitive gaming for a long time to come – the older generation didn't grow up with it, and with a new generation growing up with competitive videogames I think we will see it become even more widely accepted," is Ellis' take on things and it's hard to disagree with that assessment. Pro gamers are emerging in their late teens and early twenties having been immersed in online gaming. They are embracing social media and video streaming in ways that the vast majority of gamers (if the average gamer age of early thirties is to be believed) have only gradually learnt about.

The rise of eSports globally timed rather nicely for *League Of Legends* as it simultaneously reaped the benefits of streaming services, gaming taking over YouTube, improved internet speeds globally making for smoother online functionality and viewing, and so much more. You only need to see the takeover of Twitch by Amazon for $970 million (£585 million) to see that something massive has been building in the background. It does beg the question of how impactful the advent of Twitch has been to the promotion of *League Of Legends* and the eSports scene, giving gamers access to great examples of pro level ability.

"With eSports being around for over a decade, it's not Twitch or *League Of Legends* that's created competitive gaming," says Ellis, who points to something of a perfect storm of game, tech and developer making this phenomenon happen. "A combination of an extremely popular game with a very passionate developer, coupled with the technology, [has] allowed a platform like Twitch to come around... it was truly a case of everything coming together at once, spawning something really cool which is eSports as we know it today."

What's more, these technologies have given pro players extended lifespans beyond the main stage or team management. "It has provided an alternative career for many as it opens up opportunities to full-time streamers," explains Duthie. "With Amazon purchasing Twitch.tv late last year, I'm incredibly excited to see what they bring to the table. The other obvious benefit for pro players is that they can stream their usual practice games (Solo Queue) and interact with their fans whilst making an impressive additional income."

Seb 'Numlocked' Barton, another top UK pro, feels similarly: "I think it's made pro players even more successful individually, some even to the point where they're having to decide on either being a pro or being a full-time streamer. I think that's great for both the game and eSports as it opens up career opportunities."

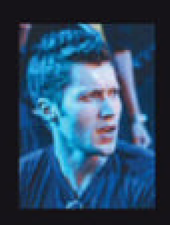
Hand-in-hand, either through direct targeting or serendipitous circumstances, *League Of Legends* and pro gaming have found a sustainabile relationship. The passion of eSports fans and amateur players to learn more about the game, to play against and train with these seasoned veterans, is giving gaming some real career-like qualities. You need only look at the caster (a commentator for pro gaming events) career trajectory to see that older players are now forging postplaying roles as analysts and opinion makers. There's a whole lifecycle and business developing around *League Of Legends* that goes beyond the MOBA's mechanics.

"We are seeing huge companies begin to get involved with eSports such as Coca-Cola, ESPN and Pepsi to name a few," points out Duthie.





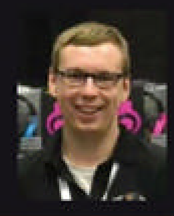
League Of Legends can look like chaos incarnate from afar, but it's tactical, all about controlling the lanes of the game, and bringing Champions into the heart of the fight at the right time.



Pro Gamer Tip

GETTING STARTED

"If you are a new player who is thinking about getting into *League of Legends*, learn to be patient - it will take you some time to understand all the different champions in the game. You can watch streamers online to get a good grasp of how they do things and try put that into practice. I would advise playing with a group of friends as well if you can – as when I first started out that is how I had the most fun." - Stephen 'Snoopeh' Ellis



Pro Gamer Tip

MASTER THE GAME'S BASICS

"Focus on learning the basics of the game and of MOBAs (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) in general. It is a very unique game style that relies on teamwork, communication and coordination to succeed. If you have these basic attributes and a willingness to learn you'll pick up *LOL* in no time!" - Jamie 'Tundra' Duthie from FM-eSports

"Major investors, organisations, agencies, media outlets are already keeping a close eye on *League Of Legends*," adds Ellis, who is also branching out into hosting and 'eSports personality' roles. "We are being taken seriously, but it will still take time."

League Of Legends has become that force for change though. It's lifting eSports into the realm of serious debate and analysis, and also helping to take videogaming out from the dark corners of the public consciousness and placing it in the centre of brightly lit stadiums and arenas all over the world. Just last month it was announced that a second US university, University of Pikeville, would be offering a pro gaming athletic scholarship and start up an amateur team for competition. It follows in the footsteps of Robert Morris University in Chicago. Playing and becoming great at *League Of Legends* could actually pay for people to get a higher education in the States.

But we can't help but come back to the surprise that seems to surround every big *League Of Legends* announcement, not least in the UK. Why do so many here still perceive Riot's game to be a fringe concern, when it's clearly so popular?

"In short, the social stigma attached to professional gaming," is Duthie's assessment, whose FM-eSports team is one of the few based in the UK and made up entirely of British talent. "The proof is that there is an interest for eSports in the UK if you look at Multiplay's Insomnia Gaming Festival or the *League Of Legends* Championship Series at Wembley (which sold out a stadium of 11,000). It's only a matter of time before *LOL* explodes in the same way it has in other countries and 2015 will be the year for that."

An underlooked element of *LOL*'s success is that it just seems to have a great sense of fun about it. Themed skins for many of its champions are testament to that.

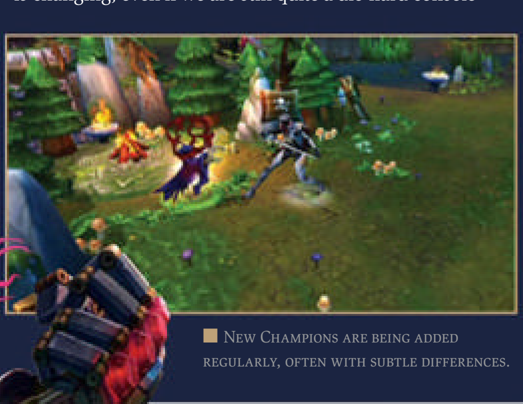
nation. I've had more media outlets contact me to cover competitive gaming now than any point previously."

As three UK-born pro players, Ellis, Barton and Duthie are evidence that there's a growing interest here for both the game and the competition. As Ellis' own path into playing *LOL* professionally proves, even where there's an initial lack of interest it can quickly grow, as it did for him five years ago. "Being my first MOBA genre game, it was quite a steep learning curve and I was just getting wrecked by the more experienced players," he admits. "It wasn't until three months later when some buddies recommended I try it out again and play with them. This was when I got hooked – the amount of fun we had playing together made it a much more enjoyable experience. After a few months I noticed I was considerably better than my mates and long story short became a professional gamer."

"THE PASSION OF ESPORTS FANS AND AMATEUR PLAYERS TO LEARN MORE, TO PLAY AGAINST AND TRAIN WITH VETERANS IS GIVING GAMING CAREER-LIKE QUALITIES"

Barton agrees there is a stigma in the UK, but thinks Riot itself is doing big things to correct this. "With Riot's 4 Nations [the tournament that is exclusive to British and Irish teams], 2015 has the potential to be huge for the UK and really set it on its way for gaming to not only be more acceptable but maybe even a viable career choice within the UK – a real dream."

"I would say it's growing, especially with the rise of LANS such as Gfinity," adds Ellis pointing to the growing professional base outside of Riot's moves. "Traditionally the UK has always been console-based, but I do think that is changing, even if we are still quite a die-hard console



New Champions are being added regularly, often with subtle differences.

Stories like this are in the minority, but they are becoming more and more common. *League Of Legends* has become a global force to be reckoned with and one that really cannot be ignored any longer.

"I believe going into 2015 and beyond, Western society will begin to accept eSports more and more, so much so that it's part of the 'norm'," is Duthie's analysis. "Professional players will be able to pursue their career path without fear of judgement, but also will do so under a stable income due to the developing infrastructure surrounding UK eSports."

Barton is similarly optimistic for 2015 thanks to Riot's moves into the UK. "Everyone has the right intentions for the UK and is working really hard to see their dreams for gaming in this country realised," he tells us. "I'm just personally hoping for more competitions."

At the rate this game franchise and its accompanying thirst for competition is expanding and spreading, it's unlikely to be long until events like the LCS in London in July 2014, become a regular occurrence. If Ellis is right that we're just more console focused in the UK than elsewhere, then it seems we're very much behind the trend on eSports and *LOL*, but the country is waking up and the ease of entry for games like *LOL* is making it incredibly easy for gamers to make their start on the path to the main stage. Riot's quietly incredible MOBA is in a tight embrace with pro gaming to launch both into a new era.

Regional Champions

Who have LOL players been picking as their heroes in the different server regions recently?

NORTH AMERICA & EUROPE (WEST) THRESH

■ As a Support character, Thresh's popularity can be pinned on his versatility and tankish qualities late in a game. His close combat abilities, thanks to his secondary Fighter skills, makes him a hard champion to master.

EUROPE (NORDIC/EAST) KATARINA

■ recommended as a starter Champion, Katarina's abilities make her a great finisher, and she can escape easily too. Her passive ability reduces the spell timers for each kill and assist, keeping her in fights longer.

BRAZIL & LATIN AMERICA (SOUTH) LEE SIN

■ Dealing tons of damage in the early game, Lee Sin can give his team a big lead. This will drop off, but his utility keeps him vital later on. Secondary spell effects means he can be used in different ways.

RUSSIA REK'SAI

■ This Champion is unusual in that she has no cost to her abilities. Instead, she builds Fury from zero to 100. It's a very different type of character, not least as she's also a pure Fighter class with no secondary attributes.

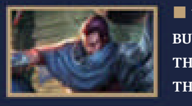
SOUTH KOREA EZREAL

■ With limited close combat effectiveness, Ezreal is a Marksman who can use Arcane Shift to get out of harm's way or snipe enemies from afar. His popularity indicates the play style preferred in the region.

LATIN AMERICA (NORTH) & OCEANIA VAYNE

■ While fragile in the early part of a game, Vayne comes into her own as the battle reaches its climax. Her speed, assassination potential and true damage means she can tear into tanks and shift the balance of the fight.

TURKEY YASUO



■ with no ability cost other than cooldown, Yasuo builds up Flow, which can be used as a shield. Getting there requires 4,600 units of travel, so keeping Yasuo on the move as a Fighter and Assassin is key.

[based on server statistics from 17 Dec 2014 to 15 Jan 2015]

The Caster's View

Professional eSports broadcaster Joe Miller gives us his insight into the growing world of League Of Legends



FIRST OFF, COULD YOU TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CASTER?

As a caster for any game, the audience is relying on you to tell the story of the game. It's my job to tell you in what form both teams are, who the players to watch are, what the history is between the teams. Casting is storytelling on a large scale. If you go away with questions as to who won and why, then I didn't do my job!

HOW HAVE YOU SEEN PLAYERS' TRAINING ROUTINES CHANGE OVER THE YEARS?

Training routines have changed massively over the years. In my day we would train a couple of nights per week and play competitions maybe once per week. Since things have become professional with wages and big money competitions, players are playing 12-14 hours a day. Teams are often living together in special training houses to maximise their hours and improve the relationship of the players.

WHAT ROLE DOES SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY PLAY IN PRO TEAMS THESE DAYS?

Psychology is becoming more and more important. With the addition of leagues like the LCS and teams having gaming houses close to the studios, it's becoming crucial to keep an eye on how players are doing emotionally. A sports psychologist can help a winning team keep on winning and a losing team turn things around.

DO YOU THINK THOSE OUTSIDE OF THE COMMUNITY ARE TAKING *LEAGUE OF LEGENDS* SERIOUSLY ENOUGH?

I think a lot of other communities like to talk down to *League of Legends,* but it is mostly simple jealousy. The game came out of nowhere and people thought the viewing figures we saw from the Season 1 finals were fake. We have seen since then that the game has gotten stronger and stronger. I think everyone is watching how *League of Legends* develops, even if they don't admit it.

WHAT DO YOU THINK NEEDS TO BE DONE TO GET UK PLAYERS AND TEAMS MORE INVOLVED IN *LOL?*

The UK still struggles because PC gaming is still a tough subject. It has gotten a lot better since I was playing games during school, but it is still very difficult to explain to most people what a professional gamer does and how it even exists. Multiplay have been doing fantastic work for so many years now and I'm hoping the addition of ESL UK will see more events come to the forefront and make PC gaming less of an oddity.

HOW DO YOU THINK THINGS ARE GOING TO CHANGE OR GROW IN THE COMING YEARS?

The future is interesting. I feel that numbers between season three and four have somewhat slowed down the incredible acceleration. but I think that they will remain constant for another couple of years at least. That's when we will see how well Riot can entice a community to stay!

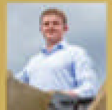
THE BIGGEST GAMES YOU'RE NOT PLAYING

WORLD OF TANKS

110 MILLION PLAYERS ACROSS ALL PLATFORMS, 11 MILLION DOWNLOADS BETWEEN IOS AND ANDROID LAUNCHES LAST YEAR

World Of Tanks developer WarGaming.net has its development team spread out across the world – from Australia to Cyprus, the Ukraine to the US, WarGaming has a presence on most continents, with plans to expand further and add to its impressive roster of 2,200 staff. Its most notable game, World Of Tanks, has attracted 110 million players globally – a number which continues to grow – and has succeeded where countless others have failed: cracking the Russian market. We spoke to WarGaming CEO Victor Kislyi, asking him how the studio keeps players interested, and why *WOT* has such global appeal…

Have you found that the game's success has come with any drawbacks?



Back in the day, we were burning physically sometimes – the network cards and routers actually burnt! Right now, our record is one million concurrent players from Russia alone: can you imagine the technology needed for *one million Russians* destroying their tanks on virtual battlefields with bullets flying around non-stop? It's like a banking system or a search engine in terms of load capacity, with success comes certain requirements. That's a lot of work, and it's a huge legacy system, so we need to allocate more and more resources to *World Of Tanks*, both on the development and publishing side of the game.

> "WE'RE NOT A HIT-AND-RUN COMPANY THAT MAKES MONEY FOR A YEAR OR TWO THEN GOES OFF TO DRINK COCKTAILS ON PARADISE ISLAND"

What's the key to its continued success?

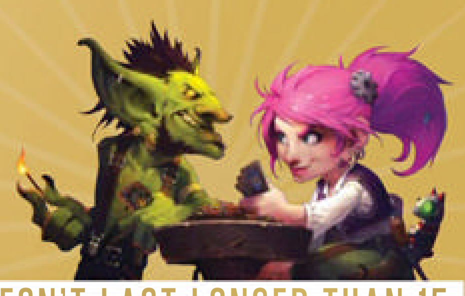
Four years ago, *World Of Tanks* was a totally different beast to what we've got today. Success comes only with constant adaptation, change and modification. Player requests and your own creativity have to be combined; WarGaming has been going for 16 years now, and for most of this period, we were 100% a PC company. It was only 2010 that we moved to digital, away from physical copies; it was only 2014 we moved to Xbox; it was only half a year ago we launched on mobile. The future is likely to be in virtual reality, streaming and so on, so as a company we need to look at gaming culture and technology to move forward.



That's not a matter of some board of directors meeting setting out a five-year strategy, no; it's everyday experience. We watch our players, see what they do, listen to what they want… we're not a hit-and-run company that makes money for a year or two then goes off to drink cocktails on Paradise Island. We've built WarGaming as a company that will be sustainable and growing for the foreseeable future: the next 10 or 20 years, for sure. As for the key to our success? Our ability to react quite rapidly. We listen to our players all the time.

HEARTHSTONE

20 MILLION REGISTERED PLAYERS ON THE FIRST SUCCESSFUL DIGITAL-ONLY CARD GAME



As of September 2014, Blizzard's online-only card game had succeeded in drawing in over 20 million registered players. That was just on PC and iOS – since then, the game has launched on Android and proceeded to target the Eastern market (an area traditionally wary of Apple hardware). Despite no official figures since the Android launch, we're confident that there are a few more million players hooked on *Hearthstone*'s deceptively simple gameplay by now.

Hearthstone's popularity is easy to understand – developed by a team that's passionate about collectible card games lends a genuine authenticity to how *Hearthstone* feels as a card experience. The development team always intended to mimic the feel of a physical game, but with all the benefits of operating on a digital platform – the lead designer (Eric Dodds) has even stated he's 'pleased there can never be a physical version of *Hearthstone*', so committed are the team at Activision Blizzard about its place as a digital entity.

With that in mind, you can understand why *Hearthstone* has gained the huge player base it has, in only one year on the market. Firstly, a timer dictates the pace to you – every single turn is indiscriminately ended if you take too long to make a move: something

> "THE AVERAGE GAME DOESN'T LAST LONGER THAN 15 MINUTES – PERFECT FOR THE MOBILE PLATFORM"

that addresses the pacing issue a lot of physical deck building games suffer from. The average *Hearthstone* game doesn't last longer than 15 minutes – perfect for the mobile platform, targeting those tricky moments of dead time the average tablet player has throughout the day.

The game also draws you back in with Daily Challenges – you're able to carry three at once, and completing them rewards you with Gold: the game's internal currency that ultimately allows you to purchase digital Booster Packs and play in the Arena (for more Booster packs, Gold, and Dust to craft cards with). The reward economy is a *huge* factor when considering *Hearthstone*'s appeal – you never feel like you're just playing for the sake of it: there are always more cards to be had, and you always know they're imminently unlockable. It's a genius loop of positive reinforcement that other mobile developers would do well to learn from.

Then there's the actual construction of the deck itself – smooth interfaces and easy to understand menus make it easier than ever to build battle-ready decks, simultaneously eliminating any chance of cheating. Being free, *Hearthstone* always ran the danger of falling into pay-to-win territory, but the method of dealing out cards means that whales have just as much chance of getting the good stuff as casual, non-paying players. Thanks to RNG, those that put more money in will get the better cards (eventually), but even that doesn't guarantee a win. *Hearthstone*'s balancing is another reason for the huge player base – pros and noobs can play together, and between the higher-level Arena and the training ground Play area, every battler has a place to go.

Hearthstone is the first successful mainstream card game that's actually made an impact on the industry. Even when more franchises move to tackle this ridiculously lucrative market (analysts predict *Hearthstone* will top $30 million by the end of its first year), we doubt any will take the crown away from the first king of the new interactive genre.

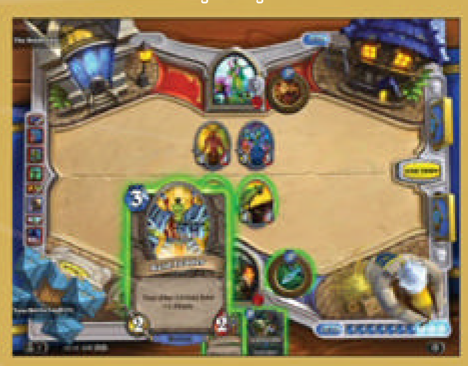


UNDERSTANDING HEARTHSTONE'S CARDS





● *Hearthstone*'s layout is immediately understandable, even to those who are relative card game virgins.



● You won't get to see the full and impressive depth of *Hearthstone* until a few games in… at least.

COUNTER-STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE

5 MILLION UNIQUE PLAYERS PER MONTH AND COUNTING, STEAM'S SECOND MOST PLAYED GAME

Counter-Strike: Global Offensive had a rough start – when it launched back in August 2012, it attracted new players and the old guard that had made *Counter-Strike* an enduring brand, thanks to 2004's *Counter-Strike Source*. However, as players began to look beneath the curtain of Valve's newest FPS, they didn't see much had changed since *Source* or *1.6*. So how did *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* go from seeing a *massive* dip in player numbers a few months after its release to being Steam's second most popular game?

Well, Valve listened to its players, and in the first 18 months of the game's life, the company radically redefined the game and moulded it to the tastes of the players that stuck around. Weapons were revised, new game modes were introduced, the matchmaking was completely re-thought and the entire UI was stripped down, broken apart and rebuilt. After these tweaks, the game was back up to traditional *Counter-Strike* standards, and that's when its domination of the PC FPS scene really began. The game is different to the other FPS games that succeed on console for a few small but significant reasons. Firstly, *Global Offensive* doesn't require the levels of commitment the newer *Battlefields* or *Call of Dutys* do – it's egalitarian: everyone has access to the same items at all times, and your rank has no bearing on your likelihood of victory. You can play two hours a week, or two hours a day, and you'll be at the same level. *Global Offensive* is about skill, nothing else, and that level playing field is attractive to the PC market.

> "YOU CAN PLAY TWO HOURS A WEEK, OR TWO HOURS A DAY, AND YOU'LL BE AT THE SAME LEVEL"

Where a lot of other multiplayer-focused FPS games have come to rely on twitch skills and hectic gameplay, *Counter-Strike* has continually refined its unique pace: losing concentration for a split-second won't punish you here, and you can usually trade damage with someone shooting at you if you respond quickly enough. This cadence and tempo makes every match interesting (especially when the rounds devolve into a 2v2 cat-and-mouse hunt around the maps).

Also, if a PC gamer with a low-end laptop wants to get their FPS fix, it makes far more sense to download *Counter-Strike* (for $15) than it does to risk burning their machine out on the newest *COD*. Between price point and accessibility, fairness and pace, it's easy to see why *Counter-Strike* is so widely adopted, and manages to keep its numbers so consistently high. It's also worth noting that *Counter-Strike* is making waves in the eSports scene, getting broadcast on national Finnish TV (to an audience of 70,000) and has hit the accolade of fourth most streamed game on Twitch recently.

The game harks back to the days of the original *Counter-Strike* – a game that fundamentally altered the FPS genre. *Global Offensive* looks set to do the same, but for the genre's audience, rather than the genre itself.

A HISTORY OF COUNTER-STRIKE



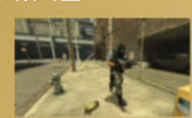
COUNTER-STRIKE

● *Counter-Strike* began life as a mod to Valve's *Half-Life*, created by Minh Le and Jess Cliffe in 1999. Valve, hugely impressed by the duo's vision, hired the modders and incorporated them into the core development team, acquiring their IP in the process and turning *Counter-Strike* into a globally recognised brand.



COUNTER-STRIKE: CONDITION ZERO

● Released in 2004, the first follow-up to the original game incorporated a single-player mode as a core fixture, and used AI to rebalance gameplay. *Condition Zero* had a muddy development period (from Rogue Entertainment, to Gearbox Software, to Ritual Entertainment, and finally settling at Turtle Rock Studios).



COUNTER-STRIKE: SOURCE

● A complete remake of the original game, *Counter-Strike Source* mostly focused on upgrading the graphics and effects of the first game, making the game more appealing to gamers used to the improved graphics that were beginning to permeate the PC market. At the time, *Source* was the most played online game of all time.

SMITE

4 MILLION PLAYERS AND THAT'S BEFORE IT EVEN GETS AN XBOX ONE RELEASE…

MOBA players tend to head to *Dota 2* or *League Of Legends*. Both games take an absurd share of the overall MOBA market, while other arena-based online battlers are left out in the cold. Stalking the shadows of the two MOBA behemoths, however, is *Smite*.

Hi-Rez Studios launched the third-person action game in March 2014, and since its release, it's manage to attract at least 4 million unique players: for a MOBA that isn't one of the 'big two', that's impressive. One reason *Smite* stands out over some of the other pretenders to the MOBA throne is its POV – the third-person camera *Smite* uses makes it feel *incredibly* different from what MOBA players are used to, and actually makes gameplay feel more involving. It's an innovation that brings out the action of the genre, and is a far cry from the cynical re-skins the genre has come to be associated with.

Speaking in June last year, chief operating officer Todd Harris outlined that Smite's player base is split almost evenly across Europe and the US (clocking in at 45% and 40% respectively), South America counted for 10% with miscellaneous countries accounting for the other 5%. Since then, the game has established its own servers in Asia – opening up the most lucrative MOBA market, too. By Harris' own metric, *Smite* would come in around 10-12 in Steam's 'Most Popular' section (measured in daily players).

Harris has claimed Hi-Rez and *Smite* have attracted more players to the MOBA genre because they offer the only 3D/action option, making it more attractive to gamers versed in shooters or MMOs. Since other MOBAs mostly feature moves that auto-lock on when activated, they make it easy for strategists to dominate the field. But *Smite* functions differently – 90% of the damage-dealing attacks have to be manually aimed over the shoulder, offering skill-based players that want to try a MOBA that's a little different to sink their teeth into.

Smite is due to launch on the Xbox One soon, too – a natural choice considering how the game handles. This will be the first true MOBA available on current-gen machines, and it means that Hi-Rez Studios and Microsoft between them could rip open a whole new target audience: the console MOBA player. Its position as a free-to-play game (common amongst the games presented in this feature) also allows it to draw in more players: with no paywall impeding any audience, it's likely that *Smite* will see its numbers rocket, just as *World Of Tanks* did when it launched on Xbox 360 last year. The hunger for free-to-play games on console is undeniable, and *Smite*'s unique control scheme and the very fact it got there first is likely to prove hugely beneficial to the game's player base, moving forward.

"HI-REZ AND SMITE HAVE ATTRACTED MORE PLAYERS TO THE MOBA GENRE BECAUSE THEY OFFER THE ONLY 3D/ACTION OPTION"

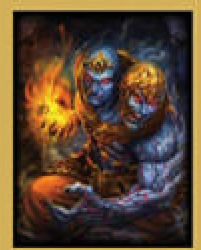


● Some of *Smite*'s interpretations of various deities has caused some controversy for the game.



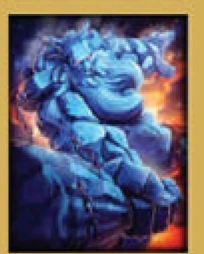
GOD-TIER

Smite's roster of playable characters are all based on gods from international mythology – we collected the five most overpowered, in case you wanted to get the drop on your opponents if you decide to go in fresh…



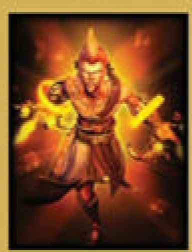
AGNI, GOD OF FIRE

With a rechargeable Ultimate attack and the ability to stack three flaming halos (which, in turn, can summon meteors) Agni is a pretty damn dangerous ranged attacker – even if he is a bit of a glass cannon. Just stay out of trouble.



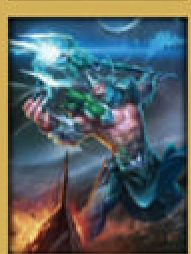
YMIR, FATHER OF THE FROST GIANTS

Ymir has a lethal array of close-range attacks, so pressure your opponents as soon as you start a match. He's also a durable tank, so don't hesitate when running into their attacks: you'll likely crush them.



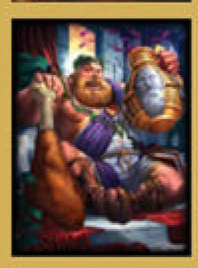
APOLLO, GOD OF MUSIC

Apollo is suited to long-range attacks, but what sets him apart from other ranged attackers is his speed. His songs can slow enemies and bolster his defences: useful for stalling and building Ultimate.



POSEIDON, GOD OF THE OCEANS

Poseidon is a mage, but works as a regular attacker, too – his area-of-effect spells and cheap-to-cast abilities can dominate a lane for entire matches. That's more irritating than OP, but it still works.



BACCHUS, GOD OF WINE

Bacchus relies on getting wasted – something we heartily endorse. His Ultimate is insta-cast, great for catching enemies off guard. He can be built as a straight-up mage too, handy for dealing massive damage.

The rural fantasy life offered by *ArcheAge* is the perfect getaway for the core MMO audience.

ARCHEAGE

2 MILLION REGISTRATIONS, 21 DEDICATED WESTERN SERVERS – AND IT HAS CHINA IN ITS SIGHTS

ArcheAge certainly got off to a rocky start; server crashes, bugs, glitches and ridiculous launch queues meant that Trion World's and XL Games MMO didn't attract that vital initial audience – the core of what *should* become any MMO's main community. Offering the game as a free-to-play service caused *ArcheAge*'s servers to melt down – the initial demand was unexpectedly intense.

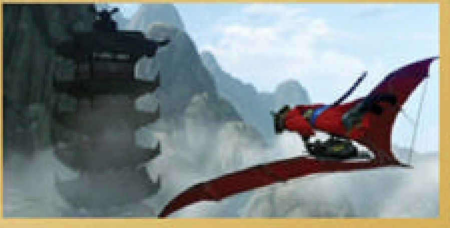
But, despite bot spam, huge exploits in the game's economy and continued server issues, the MMO managed to soldier on, with constant content drops enticing new players in periodically. The game runs a subscription service ($15 per month) and *also* uses free-to-play mechanics – arguably making players feel like they want to get the most out of their initial subscription fee, making them come back daily to tend to their virtual world.

ArcheAge's popularity could stem from its unique gameplay: the developer calls the game a 'sandpark' – a fusion of the open content structure of a sandbox game, mixed with the more linear experience players get in architectural simulation games. The result is a second life, set in a time of tribalism and conflict. You can harvest resources and make your land developed and fertile (think *Age Of Empires*) or you can commit to ship travel, risking your life in the waters of PvP where, notably, how much you've spent on the game *won't* affect your chances of victory.

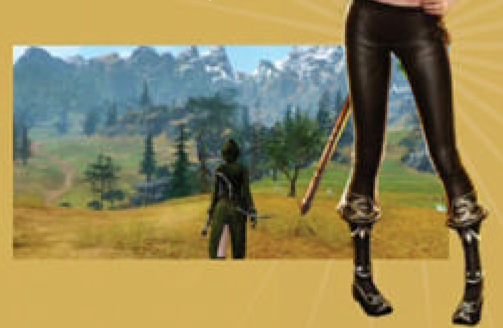
XL Games has kept players interested as *ArcheAge* struggles to its feet by providing constant commentary on how it's addressing problems. The bot purge, for example, was held back until the development team had enough data to scour over 100,000 in one go – something XL Games was transparent in sharing with its community. The studio also patches the game weekly, drops in new content on a refreshingly regular basis and is keen to respond to player feedback. The game has a lot of problems, sure, but it feels like XL Games and Trion are working together with the players that stick with the game to work towards an experience both parties are happy with. That level of involvement with the developer cannot be underestimated: make the player feel like part of the family, and they'll stay loyal throughout even the worst issues.

> "ARCHEAGE GIVES YOU A SECOND LIFE, SET IN A TIME OF TRIBALISM AND CONFLICT"

Most of *ArcheAge*'s players come from Korea, where the game was launched as a subscription-only game, divided from its Western counterpart by a free-to-play paywall. *ArcheAge* could be the start of a new age of subscription-based games in the West, if the enthusiasm from Korea is anything to go by, but Trion Worlds opted to release the game in the West as F2P. It's an interesting reflection on the MMO market as a whole: there are almost no hugely successful subscription-based MMOs that have launched in the West recently, and even though *ArcheAge* elected to go free-to-play over here, it actually draws most of its success from the subscribers in Korea. The game has attracted a huge influx of players since its Western launch, and with a developer/publisher partnership like Trion Worlds and XL Games, we can only expect *ArcheAge* to smooth out as it shapes to the demands of an international community.









Action combines with micromanagement in *ArcheAge* – a perfect formula for the pan-global appeal this MMO is enjoying already.



The New Face of War



2015 is the 15th anniversary of Total War, a series that has redefined our expectations of grand-scale, real-time tactical warfare

Creative Assembly has been busy. Since *Shogun: Total War* launched what has become a staple series for strategy players across the world in 2000, no less than eight 'full' games – and no end of expansions – have been released upon a hungry public. The most recent, *Total War: Rome II*, saw the light in 2013, giving its British developer a release rate of one game every 19 months.

Things, it seems, are only getting busier. 2015 will see the release of at least three brand new *Total War* games across a number of platforms, with existing ideas continuing and new ones being introduced. The challenge for Creative Assembly will be to provide this avalanche of new content without diluting and undermining the lofty reputation it has built for itself; proving to players that it can increase its workload further without weakening the strength of its output.

Of its new projects, it's a clear dedication to the free-to-play market that is perhaps most eyebrow-raising. As a release format, free-to-play has still yet to win over a huge swathe of the videogame market – especially amongst the 'hardcore' players that tend to flock to *Total War* – so the plan to launch »

two separate games into this realm is not going to please or excite everybody. *Total War Battles: Kingdom* is a continuation of the formula first seen in *Total War Battles: Shogun*; essentially a less exhaustive edition of the elements presented in the series' core releases. Playable on PC, Mac and tablets, *Kingdom* is aiming at the 'bite-sized' market, players looking to be entertained during those train/bus commutes or at half-time of a football match.

Genuinely new is *Total War: Arena*, an entry that does away entirely with the civilisation building elements and concentrates firmly on combat. *Arena* feels every bit like Creative Assembly's attempt at a MOBA-like experience – with battles involving two teams of players, each in control of three divisions of troops. Given your lack of numbers, working with your team mates is key. As you fight and win skirmishes you earn experience that can be assigned to both your troops and whichever historically-significant commander you've chosen; including the likes of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. Given the free-to-play nature of the game and the three-unit limit, combat comes packed with less depth than the likes of *Total War: Rome II* or *Napoleon*, but that does make it easier for series virgins to step up and get involved.

Whether you're interested in these two offerings or not, the question surrounding their release is this: is Creative Assembly stretching itself too thin? It's a fair concern considering their marquee release of the year, *Total War: Attila*, promises to be the biggest and most exhaustive game the series has seen to date.

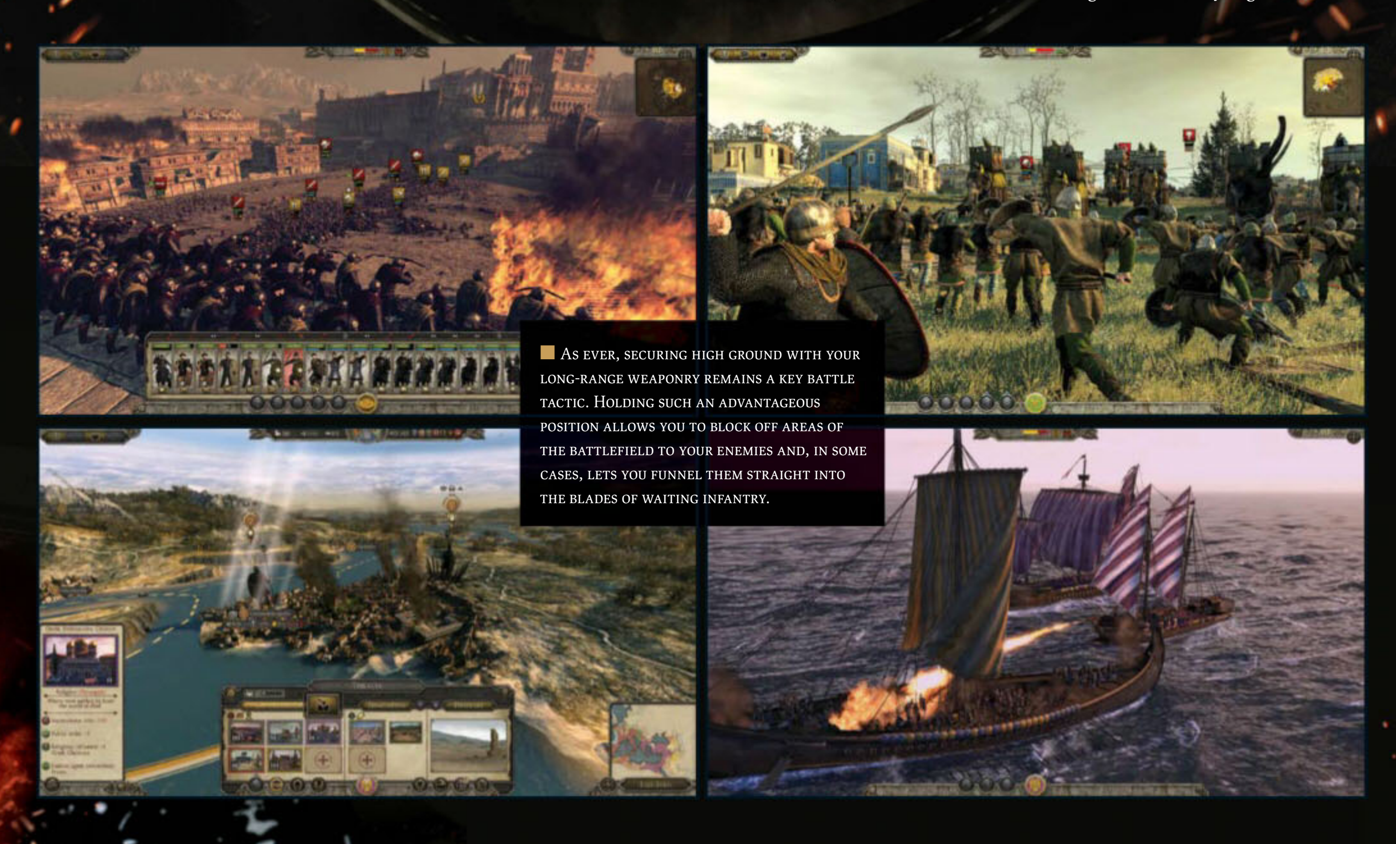
The counter-argument is that both *Arena* and *Kingdom* are being worked on by dedicated teams, that their development has not impacted the creation of *Attila*. Publisher Sega has been keen to promote this, the marketing message being that the 'traditional' *Total War* experience remains present and correct in *Attila* and it has not been affected by the series' aggressive new push into free-to-play. We hope that's true, because what we've seen from *Attila* looks impressive. Post-release disappointment would, at this point, be devastating for fans and the finger would be pointed at *Kingdom* and *Arena* as reason for failure.

To put our minds at ease we sat down with *Attila* producer Ross Manton, and campaign designer Dominique Starr, to discuss how the game has been designed and built to expand upon the core tenets that have supported *Total War* up to this point. "We want that core experience of *Attila* to feel very recognisable as a *Total War* game," urges Starr when queried on the direction of *Attila* in the face of what has come before it.

"We build upon what our previous games have already established, that's for sure. We're not looking to start from a blank slate. What we do is we look at the time period that we've chosen and explore what that can bring in terms of new mechanics, we then try to integrate those with the existing systems we have without compromising how those work."

Attila's various campaign scenarios see the addition of a number of key new features designed to alter and diversify the way we can set out on our quest for domination. The familiarly named 'Horde mode' is one of the most potentially game-changing, ridding you of the need to base your society around a collection of settlements. Instead, you can simply live a nomadic life of constant travel – seeking sustenance as you go.

"WE'RE NOT LOOKING TO START FROM A BLANK SLATE. WE LOOK AT THE TIME THAT WE'VE CHOSEN AND EXPLORE WHAT THAT CAN BRING IN TERMS OF NEW MECHANICS"



As ever, securing high ground with your long-range weaponry remains a key battle tactic. Holding such an advantageous position allows you to block off areas of the battlefield to your enemies and, in some cases, lets you funnel them straight into the blades of waiting infantry.



Evolution of War

Total War has embraced five different time periods thus far, each bringing their own twist to the formula



1

SHOGUN

■ *Shogun: Total War*, set in the time of Feudal Japan, spawned the entire series back in 2000 – a direct sequel coming in the form of *Total War: Shogun II* in 2011. Compared to many other *Total War* games, the *Shogun* titles focus rigidly, and in great detail, on a very narrow region of the world.



2

MEDIEVAL

■ After *Shogun: Total War* came 2002's *Medieval: Total War*, the focus now on Western Europe, the Middle East and North Africa from the years 1000 to 1400. *Medieval II: Total War* arrived in 2006, focusing on the same era and area of the world, but bringing numerous gameplay advances.



3

ROME

■ Set from 270 BC to AD 14, 2004's *Rome: Total War* was the third game in the series and remains the most critically acclaimed that Creative Assembly has ever made – attaining 92% on Metacritic. *Total War: Rome II* launched in 2013 to a score of 76.



4

EMPIRE

■ Set during the 18th century, *Empire: Total War* (2008) was the fifth to be released but the first to include real-time naval battles. The time period also brought with it a greater focus on weapons powered by gunpowder, giving ranged combat much more importance.



5

NAPOLEON

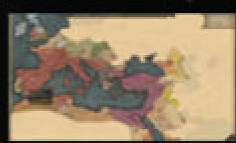
■ *Empire* might have introduced naval battles, but 2010's *Napoleon: Total War* took them to a new level by making them essential to master. All of the games thus far, though, it's *Napoleon* most struggling for a unique identity – the systems and visuals bearing huge similarities to *Empire*.

"A faction can abandon their region and move off into the world and live on the road," explains Starr. "Horde mechanics essentially turns your armies into a kind of mobile settlement capable of fighting and living without the support of a city. That kind of thing is totally appropriate to the time – this is a period of history that saw a huge amount of migration, after all.

"The only time you can't choose whether or not to employ this kind of tactic is if you're playing as the Huns, who can never establish and live in their own settlements. They're always on the move and you must embrace that style of play."

Historical accuracy is a difficult element to wrestle with for any game. On the one hand, if you're going to set your game during a recognisable historical period then players are going to expect some degree of authenticity. If a player is knowledgeable about the period in question then anything less than accuracy will make the experience feel shallow and forged. Conversely, players without existing knowledge will want to feel safe in the understanding that they're learning something new.

The balancing these twin responsibilities to history and gameplay must be performed delicately in order to not limit the potential for ideas. As Manton explains, the answer to this conundrum rests in game mechanics which relate to the time period, rather than define it in and of themselves.



■ From the tip of Western Europe to the outer ridge of the Near East, there's huge diversity in the type of lands that can be conquered and controlled. Carving a sensible route through the world will be essential when it comes to preventing your forces being spread too thin.



"We always look at new gameplay features in relation to the time period," says Manton. "For example, the family tree idea that we're bringing back for *Attila* works really well in the more compressed time period we're focusing on here. Over a bigger time period, like those we've done in the past, it's not something we felt worked so well and therefore we thought it less appropriate to include it then."

Starr takes over the thought, moving on to promote the idea that systems are included to relate to a specific period – but never in a way that limits player expression. "I guess we like to present players with a historical sandbox and, within that, we strive for authenticity as much as possible. However, gameplay is king when it comes down to it and, while we won't rewrite history ourselves, we give players the opportunity to influence and create their own stories and versions of events.

"What we don't want to do is stick so rigidly to history that it cripples what players can reasonably achieve and narrows their ability to carve their own path through the world of the game."

The idea of continuity through a family tree builds into a much bigger system of diplomacy and relationship building. In theory, this expands the number of ways you can influence the world around you and alters how you're perceived and understood within it. It's here within the diplomacy options, for instance, that the narrative you build could potentially evolve into something that bears little resemblance to the events that »

really took place. Further, it's one of the new components that Creative Assembly seems to be very keen on players engaging with frequently and to an exhaustive degree.

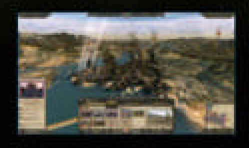
"Yeah, diplomacy is something that we're really hoping players will find interesting and different from what we've done before," Manton explains with what seems like genuine passion. "We've had people playing the game and have been defeated, but when they think over what went wrong they'll often highlight that they didn't spend enough time and thought on diplomacy.

"Then, when they play again, they engage more in diplomacy and the results they see can be very different. There are real benefits, for example, of trying new diplomatic approaches and failing and learning along the way... that kind of idea hasn't been so strong in previous games. Personally, I really like a game where I can see where I've made a mistake and am given a chance to right a wrong further down the line or after I've started a new campaign."

Diplomatic skill and understanding isn't exclusively limited to making friends and enemies of those beyond your borders, however. Whether they're part of your family or not, the most important individuals of your own society must be kept in check to make sure your plans and tactics are put into action as smoothly as possible.

Maintaining the loyalty of family members, high-ranking military officials and other personalities of influence is a key skill to master, according to Starr – with anything less putting you at risk of being usurped from within. What you don't want to do, though, is impart so such power and favouritism that a noble within your camp starts gaining too much influence and is tempted to act above their station. Such an outcome could be disastrous.

"If someone, or more than one person, does gain too much influence then that could lead to a shift in the power balance," warns Starr. "In turn, that could maybe undermine military integrity, which has a negative effect on morale. It's possible that such a shift in power could result in a civil war."





The scale and complexity of some of the battle arenas will likely be overwhelming for newcomers, who might want to start playing using 'easy' difficulty settings.

"I THINK IT'S PEOPLE PERCEIVING THAT THE GAME IS TOO COMPLICATED FOR THEM THAT'S THE PROBLEM, MORE SO THAN THE GAME REALLY BEING TOO COMPLICATED"

"Conversely, if you're seen as too powerful then you can be hailed as a tyrant and this might be the catalyst for rebellions against you. Under certain circumstances, that can also lead to all-out civil war. It's really about maintaining control over the political scene of which you're a part, making sure people are loyal and hardworking without becoming too independently powerful and influential."

Mutiny is not the only internal problem you might face, with natural occurrences potentially posing just as much destruction. Disease can play havoc with the health of your civilians and military, muting your power and potential for growth. Controlling the spread of disease comes down to approaching town planning with a kind of wisdom not so essential in previous games. Certain types of buildings produce a negative 'squalor' effect, while others provide 'sanitation'. The balance between these two statistics determines the likelihood of a disease springing up, the nature of that disease and its infection rate. Should a disease spring up in one settlement it can be transferred to another by way of trade routes or stationing an infected army in a new area of the world. However, disease opens new avenues of opportunity for the sly player – Starr describes it as an early form of 'biological warfare'.

"If a disease breaks out in your region you might decide that now is the time to sign a new trade agreement with that neighbour that you don't like all that much, spreading disease throughout their society," Manton explains. "You might even want to purposefully infect one of your armies before attacking an enemy. It's not the easiest of war routes to go down, but it can be effective in degrading the strength of your opponent over a longer period of time."

You might be laying siege to an opponent's heavily fortified city, for instance, struggling in vain to penetrate its defences and find an entry point into the softer, weaker centre beyond the walls. In such circumstances you might see greater success by throwing one of your weaker, less important, combat units to the slaughter.

Purposefully infecting them with a disease, as per Manton's suggestion, followed by having them launch an attack doomed to failure could result in you infecting the enemy's stronghold. What was once a place of death for your troops is, thanks to the forced sacrifice of a few, now yours for the taking. Just make sure you wait for the disease to die out before sending your elite units in to deliver the final blow.

Who Was Attila?

The original International Man of Mystery



Leader of the Hunnic Empire from AD 434 to 453, Attila the Hun ruled over a block of land that spread from the Rhine in Germany to the tip of the Caspian Sea in modern day Kazakhstan. During his reign he launched numerous offensives against the Roman Empire, but while he managed to capture key lands and strongholds, he never succeeded in sacking Rome itself.

The true intentions and finer details of Attila's conquests are not fully understood, the problem resting with the fact that the only existing historical records of the time are those written by his enemies in Latin and Greek. Historians have consistently struggled, and argued with each other, in an attempt to remove the clear bias under which Attila's actions were recorded – but no clear and agreed upon consensus has been reached.

Hun history and culture was never recorded physically, instead it was passed down exclusively by word of mouth through songs and poetry. This lack of historical evidence means that Attila's final resting place continues to be a mystery to archaeologists, although some objects and items have been found in places believed to have hosted battles between Attila and his enemies.

The mystery surrounding one of history's great conquerors should provide Creative Assembly with enormous freedom when it comes to creating the narrative tipping points with which they can kick off Total War: Attila's various campaigns.

Elements such as disease, diplomacy and the nomadic 'Horde' approach are most certainly intriguing propositions, but the risk here is that a series seen as too complicated for some players is growing even more perplexing. Creative Assembly, however, is adamant that this is not the case and that the 'too complex for me' aura that many players assign to *Total War* is a fallacy based on a lack of first-hand experience of playing the games.

"One of the great things about *Total War* is that you can play it to whatever level you want to," encourages Manton. "There is an awful lot of depth there if you want to engage with it, but you don't always need to work hard to uncover it at every single opportunity. There's a lot of enjoyment to be had by just playing with those elements that you like and find natural to interact with. Then, once you build up more experience and get drawn into the game, you automatically begin to find yourself using more advanced techniques and ideas to progress and take your game to a new level. I think it's people perceiving that the game is too complicated for them that's the problem, more so than

2015 is looking like a massive year for the *Total War* series with spin-offs and sequels aplenty.

the game really being too complicated. The complexity is more a marketing thing than anything else, because it really is very playable for anyone."

A new prologue has been built for *Attila* that acts as a tutorial, providing new and returning players with the basics required to get started. Additionally, Manton is keen to promote the idea that, because this is a turn-based game, it's all but impossible to be overwhelmed and caught completely by surprise as the pace of play is totally dictated by you.

On the other hand, Starr is eager to talk up *Attila*'s more punishing campaign offerings – the kinds of things that even the most experienced of players are, he hopes, going to find crushing. "The Western Roman Empire is extremely challenging and is assigned a 'legendary' difficulty rating. It is pretty bloody hard," grins Starr. "On legendary you start with loads of regions but you're getting hammered from all sides by a whole bunch of different enemies.

"Here the game becomes about how you manage to strategically retreat from the carnage and how you consolidate your strength before moving out on the offensive. You can certainly re-conquer the world as the Western Romans, but you're definitely not in a position to do that at the start. It's a survival situation, really." The inclusion of various Roman factions creates a palpable sense of continuation between *Attila* and the previous game, *Total War: Rome II*. Where *Rome II* celebrated the Roman Empire at the giddy heights of its power and influence, *Attila* is concerned with the fall of its power and ideologies – instead celebrating the rise of the barbarian kingdoms from Western Europe to the Near East.

This time period also makes sense in regards to Starr's earlier comments on wanting to integrate new mechanics into "existing systems", the historical persistence between games allowing such a transition to feel natural for both designer and player. That





With up to ten players on each team, clear and timely communication is key to coming out on top in *Total War: Arena*.



Keeping up with the speed of action during battles involving cavalry units is a skill unto itself, requiring deft use of mouse and keyboard controls.

being said, the team did look at other eras before settling on *Attila* – although they are staying tight-lipped about which those were in case they decide to revisit them in future.

"Exploration of multiple time periods is always important and we always look over many options before deciding where we're going to base a game," Starr discusses. "Normally we settle on two or three main time period options, which are usually radically different from one another in order to give us maximum potential gameplay options." What the team doesn't do is limit itself to only concentrating on time periods that carry a lot of weight and popularity amongst the public. And, although Attila himself is better known than many other figures in history, Manton argues that releasing two games set during the Japanese Shogun period demonstrates that the series doesn't rely on famous events/figures.

"We don't tend to think along the 'popularity' line when we come to deciding where to base our games. That really is not a deciding factor," claims Manton. "We have a passion for history at the studio and a passion for exposing interesting history to our audience. Furthermore, our audience tends to be very literate and cerebral, so we know that they can easily cope with any time period we present. It's not something we worry about all that much."

It's not something we worry all that much about either, so long as what's presented makes sense and is engaging enough for us to want to delve into and master the minute details on offer. Our only concern revolves around the number of games Creative Assembly is working on and whether that will have a negative impact on *Attila*, not least given the host of difficulties and disappointments that tarnished *Rome II*'s initial release.

Should the studio avoid such problems this time around then *Attila*'s list of new and enhanced features should be enough to satisfy long-term fans and enhance the series' ever-growing reputation for in-depth, strategic experiences. The series deserves a fittingly successful release to crown its 15th year.

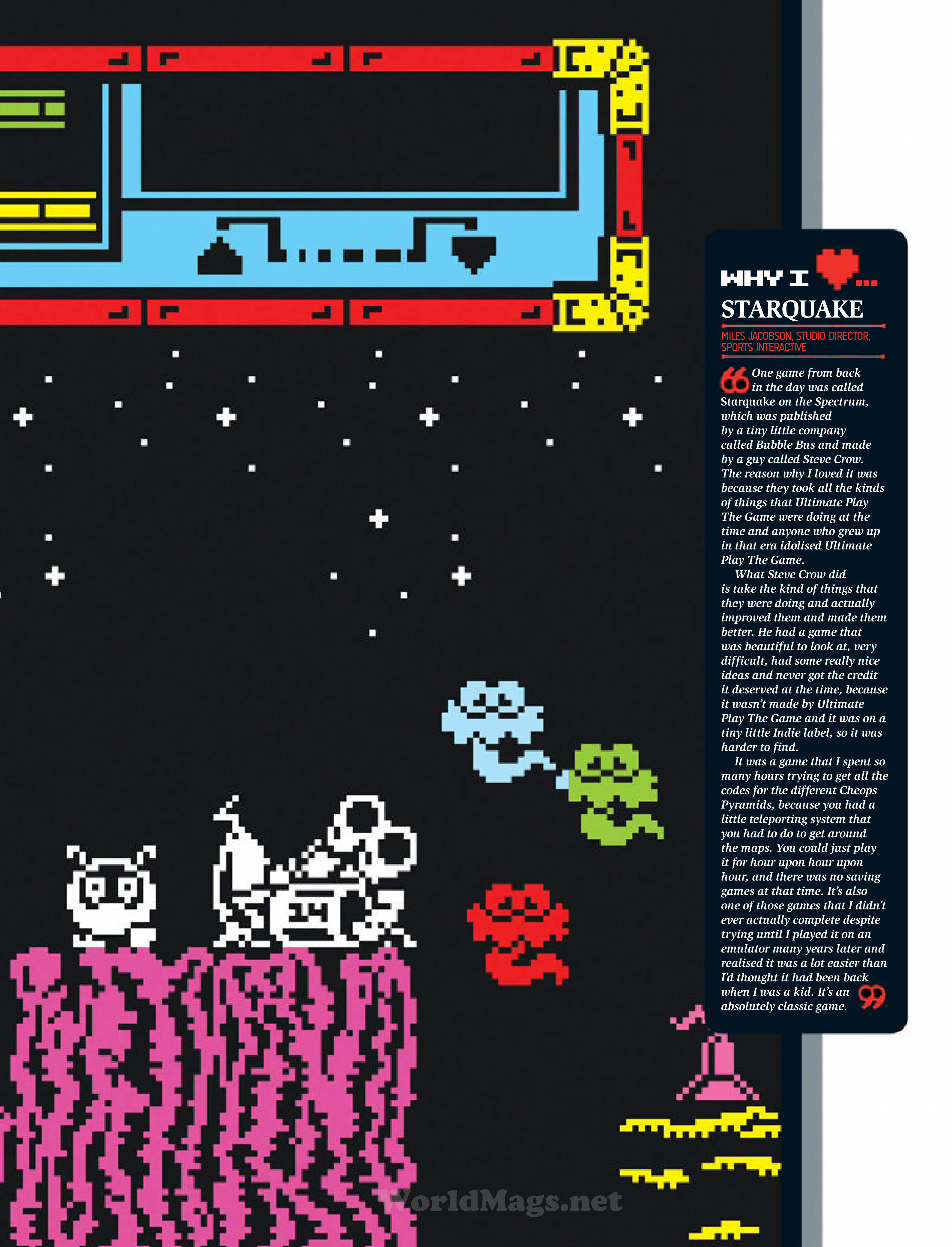
"Steve Crow took the kind of things that Ultimate Play The Game was doing and actually improved them and made them better"

MILES JACOBSON, STUDIO DIRECTOR, SPORTS INTERACTIVE









WHY I ❤...
STARQUAKE

MILES JACOBSON, STUDIO DIRECTOR, SPORTS INTERACTIVE

"One game from back in the day was called Starquake on the Spectrum, which was published by a tiny little company called Bubble Bus and made by a guy called Steve Crow. The reason why I loved it was because they took all the kinds of things that Ultimate Play The Game were doing at the time and anyone who grew up in that era idolised Ultimate Play The Game.

What Steve Crow did is take the kind of things that they were doing and actually improved them and made them better. He had a game that was beautiful to look at, very difficult, had some really nice ideas and never got the credit it deserved at the time, because it wasn't made by Ultimate Play The Game and it was on a tiny little Indie label, so it was harder to find.

It was a game that I spent so many hours trying to get all the codes for the different Cheops Pyramids, because you had a little teleporting system that you had to do to get around the maps. You could just play it for hour upon hour upon hour, and there was no saving games at that time. It's also one of those games that I didn't ever actually complete despite trying until I played it on an emulator many years later and realised it was a lot easier than I'd thought it had been back when I was a kid. It's an absolutely classic game."

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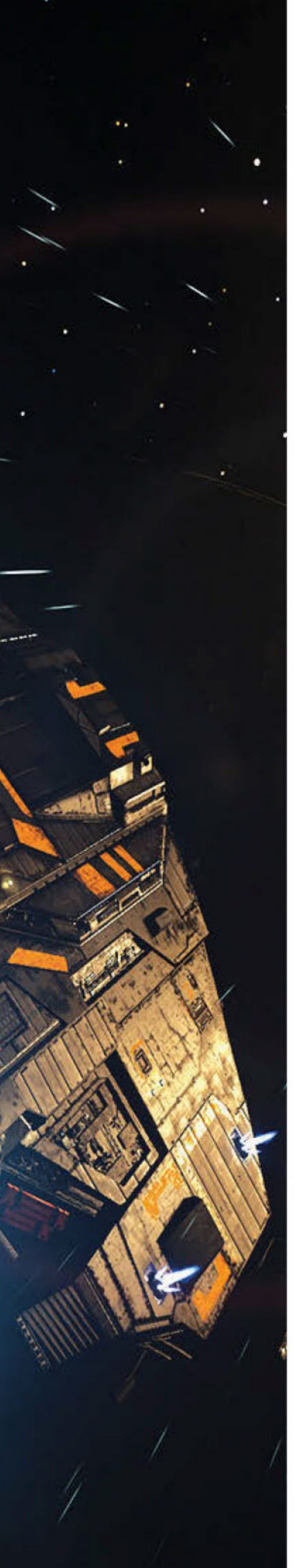
Reviews



106

ELITE: DANGEROUS

David Braben returns to the much-loved franchise for an expansive new exploration game, but does the classic gameplay still hold up?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

Let us know through the following channels:







EARLY ON, THRILLING DOG-FIGHTS ARE PUT ON HOLD IN FAVOUR OF FATHOMING CORRECT DOCKING PROTOCOL

CONTROL FREAK

While a flight-stick and throttle set-up adds to the immersion of playing *Elite: Dangerous* and doubtless gives higher-level players the edge in closely-matched space scraps, it's not required for play. Most would-be pilots will get along just fine with a keyboard and mouse or even a humble gamepad. The default but optional flight assist ensures that you never feel stranded and while it can sometimes feel that you're fighting the controls as you attempt to lock on to an enemy or during the cat and mouse game of interdiction, ultimately any manoeuvre is achievable with any of the control schemes. Similarly, a quick test on a dual-core PC with mid-range GPU suggests *Elite: Dangerous* is playable on a wider range of rigs than the recommended minimum specs suggest.





RETURN OF THE SPACE COWBOY

Elite: Dangerous



Left: Every effort has been made to enhance the in-cockpit feeling, including the ability to look around, ably supported by Oculus Rift or multi-monitor set-ups.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: OSX due Q1 2015
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Frontier Developments
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: Massively Multiplayer
MINUMUM SPEC: Quad Core CPU, 4 GB System RAM, 5 GB HDD, DX 10 hardware GPU with 1GB video ram, Windows 7 or 8, Internet connection
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Few games in recent memory have offered the promise of freedom to explore, experiment and exploit to the extent that *Elite: Dangerous* does. You are ostensibly free to make your own way through the galaxy as an interstellar trader, bounty hunter, explorer or pirate, with your role defined by your actions rather than an arbitrary class system or pre-defined character choice. It conjures up fantasies of epic space battles and of taking a basic ship, a fistful of credits, and a feisty attitude to strike out on your own and make your fortune in the inky black of space. Be warned, though, for while such galactic antics are indeed possible, they are tempered by the realisation that with great freedom comes several hours bereft of guidance and direction.

Early on, daydreams of piloting a fancy ship and nurturing a healthy bank balance seem like a long way off as the toil of turning a small profit ferrying domestic trade goods from one port to another scuppers plans for galactic domination. Thrilling dog-fights are put on hold in favour of fathoming correct docking protocol, while the dangerous trade of high-value prohibited goods is replaced by accruing petty fines for parking infringements. A handful of training missions help explain the basics of flight, fight and docking but lack wider context and fail to address the more pressing early questions of trading and bulletin boards.

Elite: Dangerous is an experience in which you learn through doing but it's also one that has you frequently reaching for a web browser to tap out questions that many others have already asked and whose answers are scattered across wikis, forums, message boards and tutorial videos. It could be that Frontier Developments intended it this way, as a means of building a burgeoning, enthusiastic and connected community, but in the early hours as you struggle with piloting your small start-up craft and eke out an existence trading in bio-waste, it can feel like the game is being deliberately obtuse.

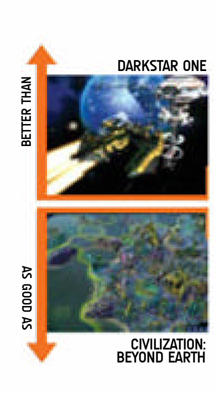
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

EXPANSIVE HORIZONS: With an entire galaxy to chart and a potential 400 billion star systems to explore *Elite: Dangerous* lends new meaning to the term "open world".



Above: It wouldn't be a space game without space lasers, and there are a dizzying number of them waiting to punch a hole in an enemy ships hull.



Left: There are a small number of micro-transactions available via Frontier's online shop front but these are restricted to liveries that fit any and all class of ship. All the important stuff must be earned in-game or pillaged.

Slowly but surely, through web searches, trial and error and exploration of the extensive but well-presented UI, things start to click into place. The trading system begins to make sense and the advantage of transporting cargo far enough from its source that it becomes exotic and likely to fetch a higher price becomes apparent. As does the wisdom of delivering domestic goods to an industrial plant or medicines to a remote port and by learning to read the commodities market well enough to identify a niche and take advantage of it helps you take your first step as a true trader, as well as feeding the wider economic system of supply and demand. By trading between star systems you'll pick up low-paying tasks from Federation, Alliance or Imperial factions and it's only through gaining a reputation as a reliable partner that you'll be offered more complex and exciting missions. Often, these will require you to learn a new set of skills, which will send you back to that open web browser and provide a feeling of levelling up a skill set.

There are numerous paths open to you once you've earned the first few thousand credits but perhaps the most useful is to invest in a mining laser and onboard refinery and head to an extraction site. These asteroid belts bring together a number of players as well as AI pirates and Federation law enforcers and so serve as a natural hub of activity. Combining the precise movements of the mining and refining process while keeping an eye on proximity sensors teaches you more about subtle craft control than any of the tutorial missions, while the threat of pirates can also serve as a gentle introduction to combat. Combining with Federation fighters to take down an opportunistic pirate can serve as an early game highlight, a step up the ladder and net you a bounty reward that boosts your mining payday to boot.

Upgrading your ship or buying one of the game's higher-end models is where most of your hard-earned credits will be spent and there are dozens of systems, subsystems and weapon loadouts to be filled and tinkered with. These ship upgrades, along with every interaction, trade agreement and mission command is dealt with via the UI from your ship; there are no on-foot sections or talking heads here. The most useful element of the UI is the galaxy map, from which you can plot a course for unexplored systems, examine trade routes in detail and begin to appreciate just how truly massive the galaxy is.

This feeling of scope is undermined somewhat by every trading port and space station sporting the same interface and automated voiceover, but such variety will likely come in time, as Frontier builds upon the solid base that it has established. The same can be said of the story, for although this is very much a player-driven experience, there is a background narrative and lore that stretches in time from the 3300s to the 9050s. Currently, the bulletins that drive the story sit alongside local traffic reports and while its admirable that the story isn't pushed on you, the galaxy would benefit from some higher profile drama to lend it a sense of space opera.

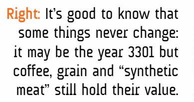
FAQs

Q. IS IT AN MMO?
Not really, it supports a lot of players but there aren't the systems in place to facilitate interaction as in a MMO.

Q. SO, NO WINGMEN?
At the moment, no, but Frontier states that the ability to group with a small number of other players is one of its top priorities.

Q. CAN I PLAY PIRATE?
Absolutely, hang around mining sites, trail a heavy-loaded vessel and strip it of its cargo. Of course, you'll need to be heavily armed to deal with the repercussions...





Right: It's good to know that some things never change: it may be the year 3301 but coffee, grain and "synthetic meat" still hold their value.



Above: Allying yourself with one of several factions is the only real way to get ahead and gain access to the better missions, but there's nothing to stop you from playing one side off against another.

BOASTS A UNIVERSE AT ONCE INVITING AND FORMIDABLE, THAT'S BEAUTIFUL BUT SOMETIMES DESOLATE



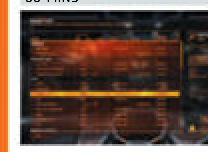
Below: The galaxy is a vast and largely unexplored expanse of black waiting to be discovered. Doing so isn't just for fun though, as it's possible to sell star data to far flung trading posts, allowing you to profit from extensive travel.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

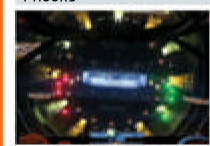
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



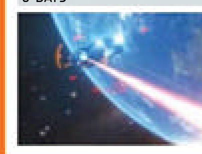
You'll have questions, so many questions, such as: which way is up, why can't I dock, how do I trade and what's going on? The freedom at this stage will taste like debilitating frustration.

4 HOURS



After a few trades and a scrap with a pirate, you'll be feeling more at home but still fairly clueless out in the big black. On the plus side you'll have nailed the docking procedure by now.

3 DAYS



Having earned a decent number of credits and established the kind of the pilot you want to be, you'll be in leagues with one of the major powers and starting to feel like a proper pilot.

Get Yourself Connected

Frontier's decision not to include an offline mode was met by the ire of a number of backers who had contributed to the game's successful Kickstarter campaign. Some demanded refunds, others claimed it went against the developer's prior promises, but rather than a misguided attempt at DRM, the decision here appears to be aimed at delivering a consistent universe. Player action has the potential to affect political wrangling, power struggles and the galaxy-wide economy and while you must always be online to play, the option for Solo-Play ensures you'll only be exposed to other players as and when you're ready. It's increasingly common to see this kind of persistent online world and as *Destiny* has shown it can be very successful.



Nonetheless, drama will soon find you whether you're looking for it or not. Lone wolf explorers out pushing at the boundaries of space will stumble across pockets of pirates, either AI or human. Traders will fall victim to opportunistic plunderers and bounty hunters will soon run into quarry as skilled and well-armed as they are and then it will be time to fight.

Early fights are desperate affairs that can last ten minutes or more as you struggle simply to keep the enemy in your sights long enough to take them out but with practice and upgrades comes a greater understanding of power management and the ability to target specific ship systems. Stalking prey through an asteroid field or running silent to avoid a rival pilot's scanners before roaring into life and hammering their shields offers a thrill that's all the greater for being so hard-earned. The first time you throw your craft into reverse to outflank a pursuing enemy or escape a pirate as you head for a trade station laden with valuable cargo you'll feeling like Han Solo, Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon all rolled into one.

Elite: Dangerous has this ability to empower because it stands as a counterpoint to the tightly-scripted, narrow-scoped experiences that so often claim to offer player freedom. It boasts a universe at once inviting and formidable, that's beautiful but sometimes desolate. Once understood, its systems can be manipulated in myriad ways but it takes many hours to reach the point where it starts to feel like you're in control of your own destiny and even then it requires you to accept that you alone can have very little impact on the universe as a whole. It will also benefit from ongoing support from Frontier to introduce new systems, opportunities and story beats to ensure there's sufficient feeling of evolution and diversity.

Few games offer the freedom of the galaxy but *Elite: Dangerous* is as much about time as it is about space. Several hours spent mastering its basics, several more to earn enough credits to start to make good on that promise of freedom. Its greatest moments must be teased out from an initially daunting collection of processes and systems but it's capable of producing breathtaking emergent stories of trade deals gone bad, bounties won and lost and duals fought against the backdrop of a blazing star. To experience it at its best requires an investment of time that some will be unwilling to commit but for those that are, there are months if not years of entertainment scattered throughout its star systems and the opportunity to make good on those childhood dreams of being a space cowboy.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GLOBETROTTER: As pretty as the planetary bodies are, it would one day be nice to be able fly down to the surface of a planet rather than crashing into it when drawing to close.

VERDICT 8/10

THE FAINT OF HEART NEED NOT APPLY

CHRIS IS OUR OLD PARTNER, Y'KNOW?

Resident Evil

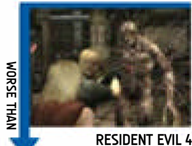
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

RESIDENT EVIL





RESIDENT EVIL 4

WORSE THAN

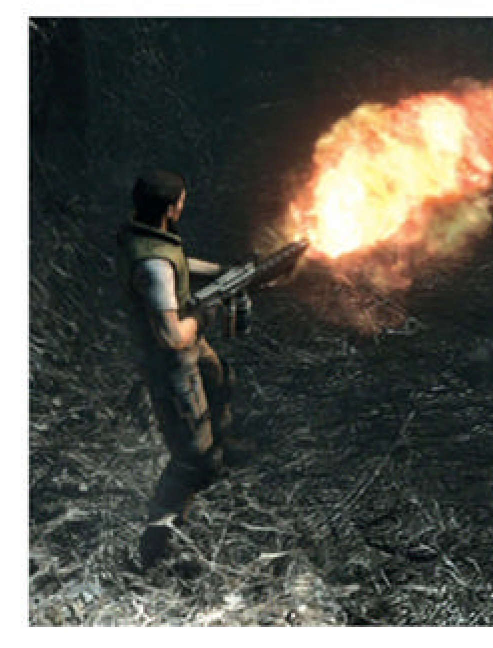
We've reached peak remake – this *Resident Evil* is a remake of *Resident Evil*, itself a remake of *Resident Evil.* The singularity is here. The world ends now. Well, that or we get to once again play through one of gaming's greatest ever remakes – the GameCube version of *Resident Evil*.

Released in 2002, it tore down the entirety of the 1996 PSone original, replacing the majority of the game with new elements: graphics, sounds, puzzles, weapons, enemies – almost everything that could be changed about the game was. This time around Capcom has been less generous with what's new, but the end product is a game that reasserts its value – its place in the pantheon of horror gaming.

The basic appeal of *Resident Evil* is what it has always been – part of a special forces unit, you end up trapped in a mysterious mansion filled with puzzles, monsters and the odd door that can be unlocked by a certain Master of Unlocking. Whether you complete a sub-three hour speed run to unlock secret weapons or dawdle for a dozen hours not knowing quite what to do, the general theme is the same: explore, interact, discover, backtrack, shoot, backtrack again, progress. It's a simple concept, albeit one that is rather showing its age these days.

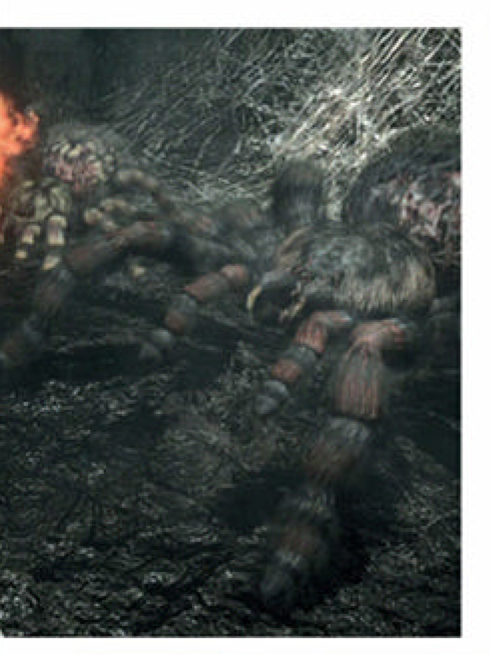
That's the biggest issue about *Resident Evil*'s re-REmake – that the core experience is one that hasn't been updated. Most of it is still perfectly good – great, in parts – but there are antiquated and somewhat clunky elements throughout that show the game's age and, in a thoroughly modern context, hamper your enjoyment somewhat. One example is not being able to drop items as and when you choose (something that was in *Resident Evil Zero*, also released in 2002) It's just an unnecessary, artificial barrier.

But you can look past the fading glory and enjoy *Resident Evil* even in a modern context. With *The Evil Within*s and *PT*s and everything



Above: Even now – 13 years after the GameCube version and 19 after the PSone original – the giant spiders are still horrible.

Below: Main character models are sharp and detailed, if not obviously from a decade ago. Secondary characters, however, aren't so lucky – some verge on PSone-level looks. As is often the case, it's not ruinous to the experience, but it can knock you out of things a bit.



FAQs

Q. HAS IT AGED WELL?
Yes and no. It looks genuinely great still, but there are elements that feel – at best – archaic.

Q. DOGS, WINDOWS, SCARES?
If you played it back in 2002 you'll know one of the most iconic jump-scares was changed. Just… don't trust the windows.

Q. ANY OTHER EXTRAS?
Nothing that's actually new, no – it's hard to say this is a remake with a lot of effort lavished on it.

Below: This version of *Resident Evil* introduced the crimson head zombies – fast, aggressive, reanimated versions of any zombie you don't decapitate or burn.



LISTEN TO THIS

At the time hailed for making the (delightfully) laughable dialogue of the original *Resident Evil* bearable, time hasn't been too kind to the voicework and scripting in the re-REmake. While nowhere near the comedy gold level of 'masters of unlocking' and Wesker mumbling 'investigate if you hear any gunfire' (after hearing gunfire that you're already investigating), there's more than enough in this version of *Resi* to get your chuckle gland a-going. And most of it is unintentional – there's little in the way of outright silliness or intentional ridiculousness, like that which permeated the series from the fourth entry onwards. But honestly, the loss of the 'Jill sandwich' line is a crime against gaming for which Capcom should apologise.

FOR CAPCOM TO BRING THIS MUCH-LOVED GEM BACK FROM THE DEAD CAN ONLY BE A GOOD THING

elses of recent years, it's heartening to know that the original master still has it. It's not as scary as it once might have been, but it still manages to genuinely unsettle in certain moments, and the atmosphere is still second to none. If you can put to the back of your mind the pernickety elements like combat and allow yourself to be drawn completely in to the world of survival horror, *Resident Evil* still has flashes of the old magic.

You may notice this review hasn't jumped at the opportunity to talk about what's actually new in the 2015 edition of a 2002 game. That's with good reason, as we touched on earlier – there's little actually new about the whole thing. Sound has been remastered, controls now allow you to operate your character directly rather than 'steer' them in the old tank format, and graphically there's been some nipping, tucking and sprucing done.

Of those three things it's the latter that's clearly the most impressive – though it comes with its own baggage. In order to fill a widescreen display with the image, Capcom has cropped the original 4:3 backgrounds and zoomed in a bit. Some will feel aggrieved by this, no doubt, but it's handled in a subtle enough fashion and if you don't like it you can just turn it back to the original output format. Either way, *Resident Evil* does not look like a 13-year-old game – the benefit of pre-rendered backgrounds leading to (at the time) high-quality character models has doubled down on said benefit. Main characters don't look out of place on modern consoles, and the backgrounds – while mainly static – are delightful.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

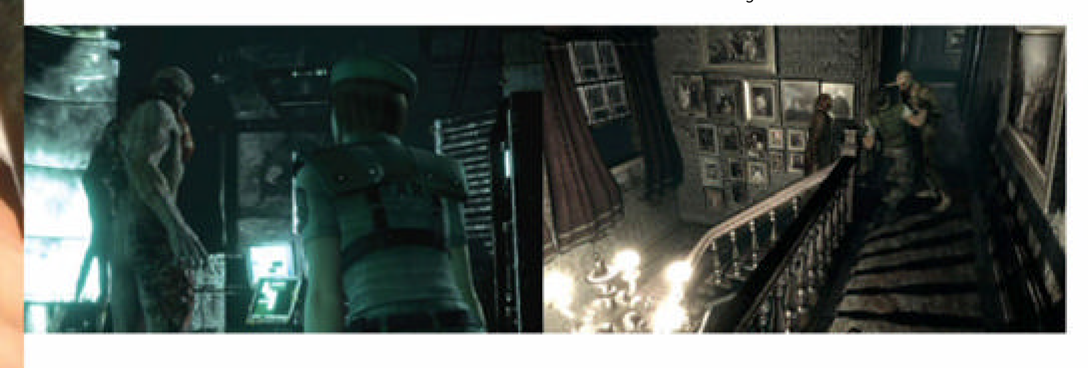
RE-REMAKE: Aside from the minor updates to controls, sound and graphics, this is a straight remake of a remake. Fortunately, it's a remake of a game that was great to begin with.

Admittedly, these static backgrounds do interfere with the new contextual control scheme, as fixed camera angles sometimes result in you running back where you came from. But generally speaking, it works well. And as with the graphical overhaul, you can just stick with the old style if you so choose.

Resident Evil was absolutely deserving of a remake like this. The GameCube version was rightly lauded as a fine reworking of what was already a classic in gaming history and, frankly, many thought it would see out history only ever available on that format. For Capcom to bring this much-loved gem back from the dead can only be a good thing, both for those who played it first time around and for those who missed out on *the* example of what a true remake can be.

So it's ironic, then, that this version of *Resident Evil* is also an example of a lot of the bad things that come with the modern flood of remakes. While it would be churlish to demand Capcom spend years totally reworking the game – a la the version this is based on – it's hard not to be a mite disappointed, in certain ways, with how it's all been put together. The new elements are functional, but by no means improve the core experience. The lack of additions – like a 'drop' ability – is telling. And generally speaking, the whole thing is creaking a bit – showing its age as a game very much of its time.

That's not to say *Resident Evil* is by any way *bad*, in that it's also showing itself off as a resilient and fun experience that stands up to these ravages of time and progress. You're going to fall into one of two camps – either it won't be as great as you remember it being, or you've not played it yet and it just won't live up to the hype everyone else has been drenching it in for the last decade-plus. It would be impossible at this stage, but even with that in mind, *Resident Evil* is still a survival horror classic – this just isn't a classic re-REmake. Now we'd just like Capcom to make a sequel worthy of this game's legacy.



VERDICT 7/10
AN ELDERLY RESIDENT, STILL AS EVIL AS EVER

GOING UNDERGROUND

Saints Row IV: Gat Out Of Hell

Above: Johnny Gat has evolved from a truly unpleasant character into something of a cult hero.

In this time of day one DLC and on-disc premium content, how strange to play an add-on for a game that's well over a year old. Yes, *Gat Out Of Hell*, the tale of *Saints Row* stalwart Johnny Gat's descent into the underworld, may be a standalone product, but it still feels like a throwback to the days of PC expansions when we're used to slender season passes and broken promises. In truth, it's well worthy of being a standalone, too. Here we have an entirely new open world – albeit one that shares structural similarities with Steelwater and Stillport – a distinct visual overhaul, and a brand new story.

After the events of *Saints Row IV*, which are far too insane to go into here, The President Of The USA (your player character in *Saints Row IV*) is yanked through a portal into hell after playing with a Ouija board at a birthday party. Without hesitation, Johnny Gat dives in after him with the sole intention of punching Satan in the face. And from there, we're off.

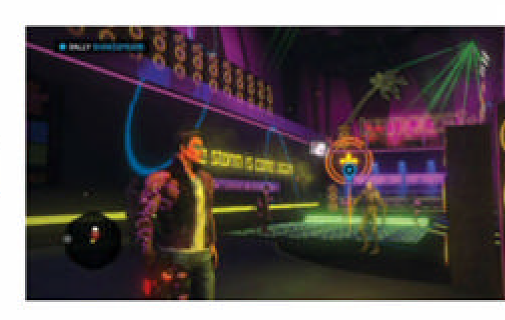
DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, 360, PS4, Xbox One
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Deep Silver
DEVELOPER: Volition/ High Voltage Software
PRICE: £33
RELEASE: Jan 23
PLAYERS: 1-2
MINIMUM SPEC: Intel Core 2 Quad, 4GB Ram, NVIDIA GTX 2600. DX10, 10GB HD
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

Hell itself is still a city. There are cars driving through the streets and skyscrapers piercing whatever the sky is in hell, and the whole world is filled with skinless moaning husks, who wander around aimlessly suffering through their eternal damnation. After a couple of missions working for Dane Vogel at the Ultor building (a character Rowers will be familiar with, and voiced excellently by Jay Mohr, who brings his own brand of frattish sarcasm to the action with great results), the game settles down into a more familiar and slightly disappointing rhythm.

THE STRENGTH, THEN, COMES FROM JUST HOW ENJOYABLE IT IS TO INHABIT THAT WORLD

While the setting is fresh and the angle engaging, the majority of time in *Gat Out Of Hell* is spent in typical *Saints Row* 'activities'. Early on in the story, you rally the likes of Vlad The Impaler, William Shakespeare (now a tormented club DJ) and Blackbeard to join your team, and have to carry out loyalty missions to get them on side. It's the same

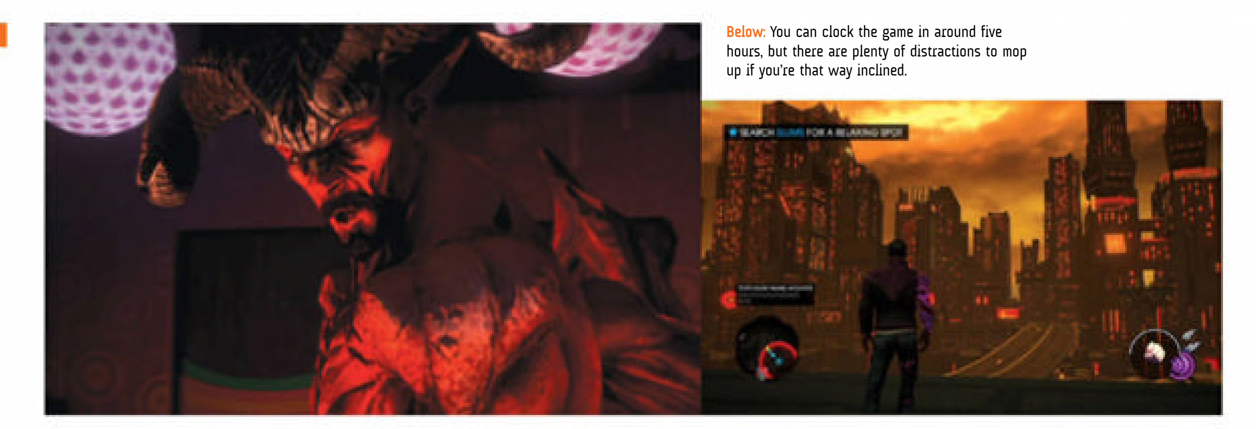


FAQs

Q. IS KEITH DAVID IN IT?
Not that we saw, sadly. The series stalwart and his voice haven't made it to hell.

Q. HOW ABOUT RODDY PIPER?
Again, nowhere to be found – probably too busy appearing in terrible WWE reality shows.

Q. IT'S FUNNY THOUGH?
Absolutely. No concerns there. Volition and High Voltage know how to write very daft.



Below: You can clock the game in around five hours, but there are plenty of distractions to mop up if you're that way inclined.

Right: Along the way, you'll meet up with a humourous selection of historical characters, all of whom have fallen out with Satan.

Below: The game runs smoothly on a mid-range PC at the highest settings, and the boost in frame-rate over console versions makes for snappy combat.



GATMAN BEGINS

While flight was almost possible in *Saints Row IV* thanks to the ludicrous powers at your fingertips, *Gat Out Of Hell* introduces true aviation and lets you soar through the blood red skies of hell at your leisure. The effect is excellent; flight is simple but stamina is limited, so you have to use the Batman-style swoop to maintain speed over long distances, and make sure you don't climb too steeply otherwise you'll 'stall'. It's a system with enough depth to feel like you're improving, but easy enough to enjoy some *Saints Row* supermanning straight out of the gate.



structure as *Saints Row IV* (and of course, *Mass Effect 2*) but here you're relegated to carrying out dull, repetitive tasks rather than the excellent and hilarious missions in the main game.

Thankfully, there are some new additions joining the likes of the wave-based Survival and the always-entertaining Mayhem. Hellblazing is an instant winner, plotting courses for you to fly through (see Gatman Begins) and setting times to beat. Pledge Rush is a new favourite, too, a hilarious minigame that sees you bashing devil-horned frat boys through flaming rings using a spiked wooden paddle. Salvation is another enjoyable addition, a flight-based effort where you have to catch falling souls before they hit the ground. Hit the floor yourself and you lose your combo. It's a clever extension of the core mechanics and setting.

Individually, every activity is enjoyable, and the increased mobility means this is the tightest and most fluid combat in the series so far, but it's clear that the game is seriously padding out its length. It clocks in at around six hours, providing you don't hoover up the myriad distractions and mini quests around the map, but you'll have seen everything within a couple of hours, before a final confrontation with Satan that is far from a classic boss battle.

The strength, then, comes from just how enjoyable it is to inhabit that world. You're even more powerful here than in *Saints Row IV*, and the freedom of movement that comes from the ability to fly means *Gat Out Of Hell* is one of the most free-flowing open world games ever. Simply put, this is a more enjoyable power fantasy than *InFamous: Second Son*. It may not look anywhere near as good, but both games are an exercise in movement and repetitive tasks, and *Gat Out Of Hell* trumps it in both combat and manoeuvrability.

A special mention, too, for the presentation. Much of the story is told in well-written storybook sequences, where the cinematic scenes are freeze-framed and drawn into the pages of a fairy tale novel. The story is snappy, sharp and concise – perfect for a game of this scope, and there are plenty of laughs along the way.

Also, a shout out for what will surely go down as the greatest cutscene of 2015. It would be criminal to spoil it, but out of nowhere the game suddenly finds a lyrical bent, and absolutely nails a spot-on parody of something very familiar. You'll know it when you see it. It'll be all over YouTube before the game's even out.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

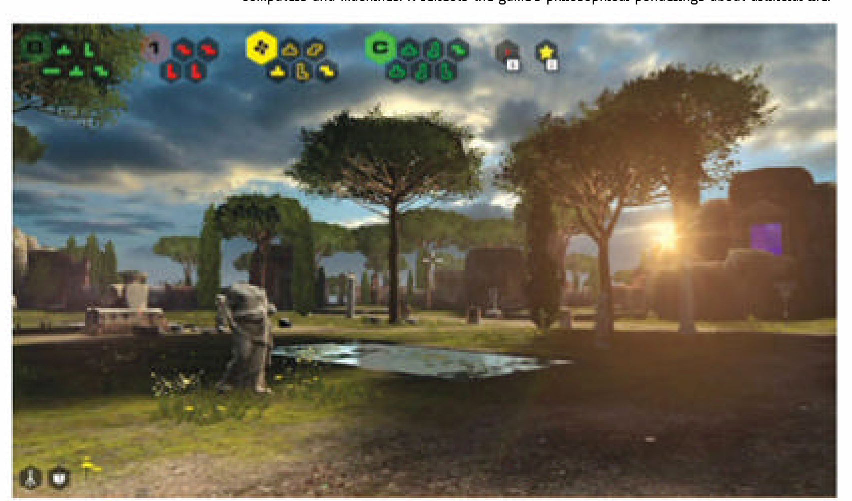
VARIETY PACK: The core experience is solid but lacking in the variety we've come to expect from *Saints Row* games. A few more bespoke missions would have been very welcome.

Yet, it's still hard to shake the feeling that this is DLC; it is padded-out content and it is, ultimately, a bit of a grind. That scene is a rare moment of true flair, while the rest is just very solid and reliable. *Gat Out Of Hell*'s component parts make the aforementioned grind about as enjoyable as it could possibly be, but with no truly memorable missions, no amazing weapons (there is certainly no dubstep gun equivalent here) and little variety in your tasks at hand, *Gat Out Of Hell* doesn't rival the likes of *The Last Of Us: Left Behind* and *BioShock: Burial At Sea 2* at the top of the DLC premiership.

As an amusing and engaging leap back into the anarchic madness of *Saints Row*, though, *Gat Out Of Hell* is exactly what you need to warm you up on a cold winter evening, basking in hellfire as you do just what you set out to do – punching Satan in the face.

VERDICT 7/10
REPETITIVE BUT HELLISHLY ENJOYABLE

Below: The game takes place in fields, deserts and snowdrifts, but you are constantly interacting with computers and machines. It reflects the game's philosophical ponderings about artificial life.





WHAT IF GOD WAS ONE OF US?

The Talos Principle

There's nothing so satisfying as when you solve one of *The Talos Principle*'s puzzles. The locked door swings open, you collect the item you've been looking for and a sweet sting of music plays to signal that this one, finally, has been crossed off the list. It's only a game, and the conundrums have been expertly designed so that anyone, with enough patience and rumination, can crack them. But still, you feel intelligent just by playing.

It's a superb mix of triple-A production value and creatively driven game making. *The Talos Principle* looks and sounds fantastic, on par with most big budget games. At the same time, it challenges your logic rather than your twitch reflexes – it plays with emotions more complex than excitement or fun.

You could easily compare it to *Portal*. The various puzzle components, introduced and explained to you one by one, have a distinct Aperture Science aesthetic. You must redirect lasers beams to open locks, jump on electric fans to propel yourself over obstacles and dodge automated turrets using cunning. But this is a much more po-faced affair than Valve's comedy puzzler. *The Talos Principle*, named after the philosophical concept that dictates man is no different to machine, takes broad swings at various metaphysical questions. What is consciousness? What is intuition? And if those things could be replicated by artificial intelligence, what would separate God from a person, or a person from a machine?

It's an ambitious topic, if a little adolescent. In the world of videogames, *The Talos Principle* stands out simply for trying to be smart. But its lofty themes feel affected and under-explored, less like a rigorous exploration, and more like conjecture from an undergrad philosophy student. At its core, *The Talos Principle* isn't interested in humanity, or questions about being. It's more about the tension between a game developer and their player – whether freedom to express yourself in a game is more important than following the path as laid out for you. You're monitored by Elohim (from the Hebrew word for 'God'), a booming, disembodied voice that tells you where you may and may not explore. The equivalent of *BioShock*'s Atlas, he's there to throw you off the scent of what's really going on. Ignore his orders and his warnings, and there are interesting things to find.

The Talos Principle confidently unpacks this relationship, between developer and player, but it's retreading a topic that's been discussed – more competently – in a myriad of games over the past ten years. The narrative endgame of The *Talos Principle* is a total cop-out – it eschews complex philosophical querying in favour of trite observations on the nature of gaming. Still, it's more sophisticated than most titles on Steam, and the puzzles have been refined by a team of true craftsmen.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Linux, Mac
ORIGIN: Croatia
PUBLISHER: Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER: Croteam
PRICE: £26.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP 32-bit, Dual-core 2.0 GHz, 2GB RAM, DirectX 10 class GPU with 512MB VRAM, 5GB Hard Drive, DirectX9.0c Compatible Sound Card

BETTER THAN — PAPO & YO





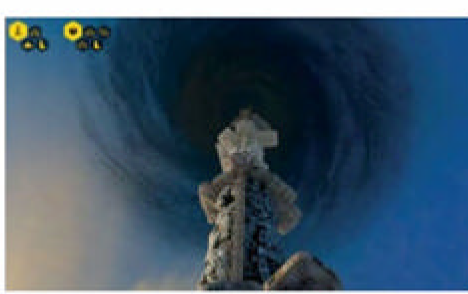
WORSE THAN — PORTAL

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

THE STATE OF BEING: *The Talos Principle* has a distinct philosophical edge. It questions whether intuition and consciousness equal a state of being alive, or whether those things can be reproduced by machines.







VERDICT 7/10

GREAT PUZZLE DESIGN COMBINED WITH AN AMBITIOUS STORY

TOAD STEALS THE SPOTLIGHT

Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker

Right: Unlike *Super Mario 3D World*, *Treasure Tracker*'s stages expand beyond a single screen with larger stages like this tricky mix of fall-away platforms and flying enemies.

The very existence of *Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker* is rather odd. It's the elaboration of an idea that was a mere minigame in *Super Mario 3D World*, expanded into a retail title of its own. This, from a company that has historically shied away from direct sequels and obvious spin-offs.

But this seemingly simplistic idea has allowed Nintendo's design gurus to flex their muscles and show, once again, that they can turn even the simplest of core gameplay mechanics into a sprawling concoction of ingenious game design.

If you played *Super Mario 3D World* you will likely recognise the origins of Toad's first spotlight outing; *Treasure Tracker* started life as a simple minigame in which Toad must navigate a series of small, single-screen obstacle courses. Crucially, Toad's inability to jump forces players to think carefully about navigating the vertically diverse landscapes. Careful and constant manipulation of the camera is required to get a full 3D view, and wrapping your head around these spaces is as challenging as manipulating the many puzzles hidden within them.

The real surprise here is how much Nintendo has managed to evolve this simple idea beyond that of the minichallenges found in *Super Mario 3D World*. You'll tackle large underwater labyrinths, lunge down giant slides, and time your steps across blocks that disappear in time with the background music.

The levels aren't all single-screen affairs this time either. You'll ride garishly small shifting platforms across poisonous lakes while dodging incoming projectiles, slip past enemies with tricky attack patterns, and rotate large sections of the stage to reveal hidden platforms and previously unseen crevices.

Nintendo has in recent years built up a real knack for leveraging its rich history, and it does so superbly in *Treasure Tracker*. There are the subtle things, such as the ability to pluck and throw turnips at enemies – a nod to *Super Mario Bros. 2* on NES – to the more outrageous tributes, like an entire level that takes on the look of a stage from NES classic *Donkey Kong*, complete with remixed music and the hammer item.

Treasure Tracker also manages to be one of the few Wii U games that actually makes clever use of the GamePad's touch screen. Wind-operated platforms have you blowing at the screen to activate them, glowing blocks can be moved with a swipe of your finger, and rotating levers can be turned by twisting the controller in your hand.

But all this touch-screen wizardry does come with its quirks. It can be jarring to repeatedly shift your focus from the TV to the GamePad and back again every time you encounter an obstacle that requires a prod of the touch screen. This is an issue when a game looks this good, as you really want to enjoy it on a massive HD TV.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



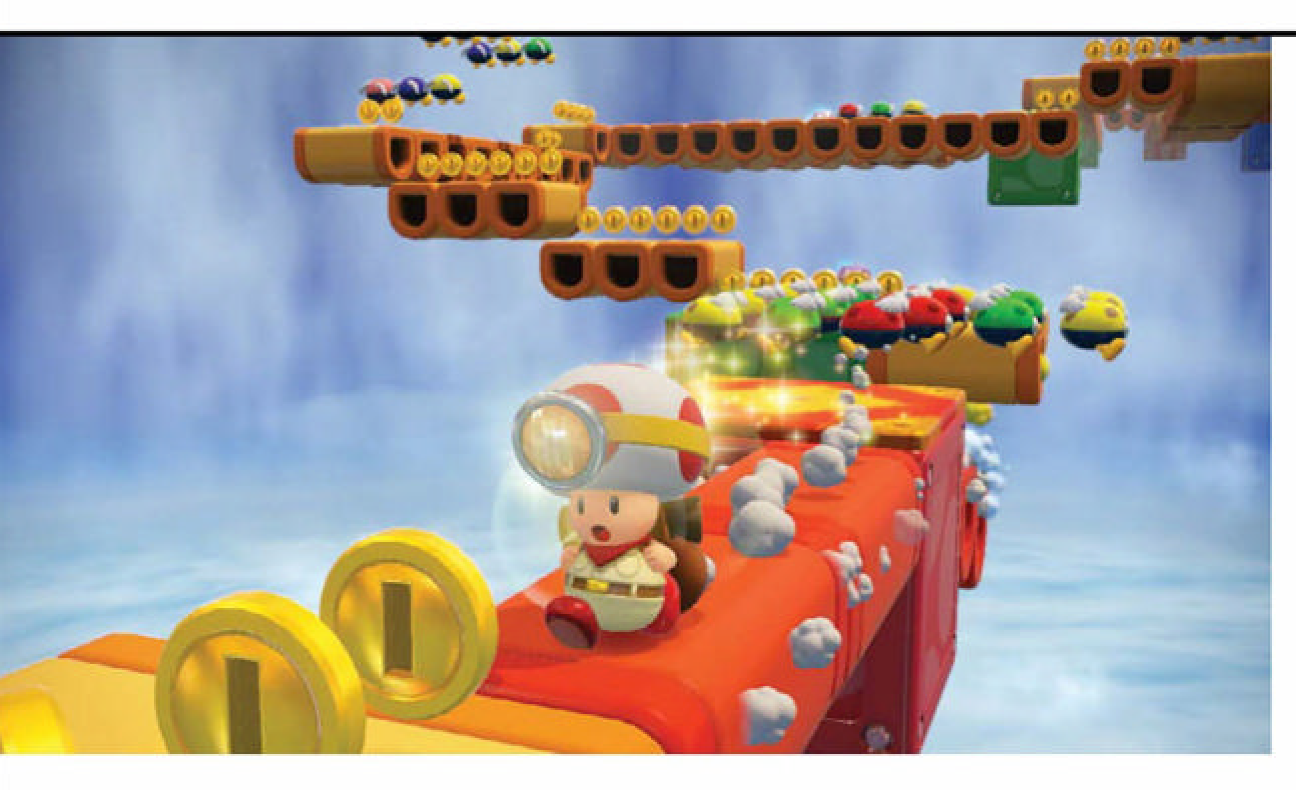
Above: There's a warm-hearted core to Toad's solo adventure that has always made Nintendo's experiences a little bit more special than anything the competition can push out.





Right: Just look at this game. It is without a doubt utterly gorgeous. Nintendo manages to get out every last drop of performance from the Wii U and the result, once again, is one of the best-looking games of the current generation.

THIS IS ONE SUPREMELY GORGEOUS VIDEO GAME, EVEN NEXT TO THE MIGHTIEST OF PS4 AND XBOX ONE TITLES





FAQs

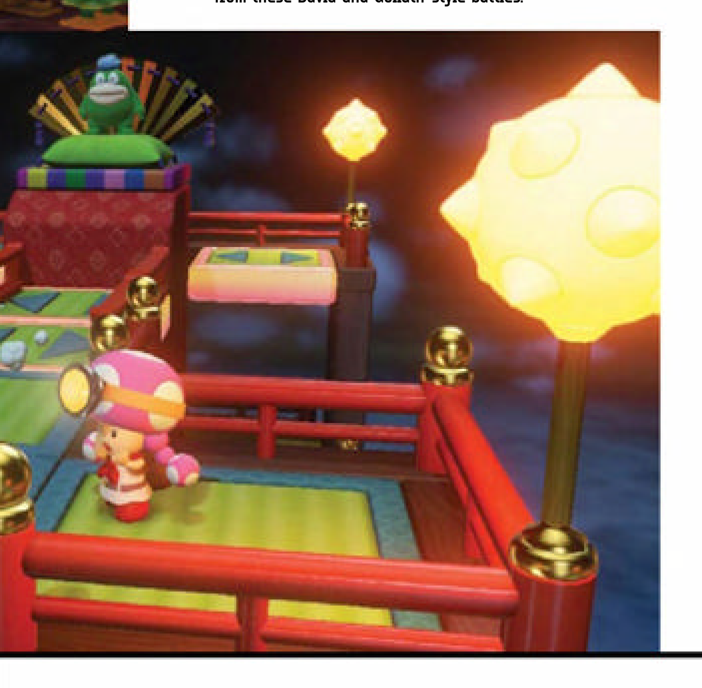
Q. PRO CONTROLLER COMPATIBLE?
Nope. Many of the stages require touch-screen controls, ruling out a traditional controller.

Q. ANY CHALLENGES?
Yes, some levels offer additional challenges, such as reaching the end without being spotted by an enemy, or rushing to finish within a time limit.

Q. WORTH HAVING AFTER 3D WORLD?
Absolutely. *Treasure Tracker* innovates far beyond the scope of the original minigame.

LIKE A BOSS

One of the biggest additions to Toad's puzzle adventure is the introduction of boss battles. At regular intervals, Toad and Toadette will encounter one of two giant beasts, a dragon or a bird, in spectacular clashes that offer a brilliant departure from the Star hunt in the regular stages. The dragon spews daunting (and impressively gorgeous) fire all over the level, whilst the bird uses his enormous wingspan to create intense winds that push the Toad duo as they try to navigate tricky platforms. You may see these bosses multiple times throughout the game, but each encounter evolves cleverly, offering a new challenge as you figure out how to emerge victorious from these David and Goliath-style battles.



The camera controls are also not perfect. Your view can be shifted with the right analogue stick or by physically moving the GamePad. The motion-operated view control must have sounded like a great idea in Nintendo's secret design meetings, but in reality it's another jarring feature that translates every subtle movement into unintended shifts of the camera. Unfathomably, the game lacks the option to disable the motion feature.

But while the camera may be flawed, the world that you view through it is anything but. It's the first thing that hits you the moment you first see *Treasure Tracker* on screen, and there's no debating it; this is one supremely gorgeous video game, even next to the mightiest of PS4 and Xbox One titles.

As was the case with *Super Mario 3D World*, the vivid colours of the Mushroom Kingdom pop right out at you in crisp 1080p resolution. It's a cartoony, blocky world with simple-looking characters, but Nintendo demonstrates its mastery at packing in those little details that bring a world to life: the plumes of smoke that waft subtly from Toad's feet as he scuttles along, the deep orange glow of lava fireballs that burst into a hundred searing particles as they collide, and the soft illumination of Toad's helmet light as he explores dark environments. *Treasure Tracker* oozes charm. Enough to literally put a gleaming smile on your face.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

A BETTER VIEW: Nintendo needs to patch deactivation for the silly motion-controlled camera. We'd have loved to see a co-op mechanic enabling players to control Toad and Toadette in tandem.

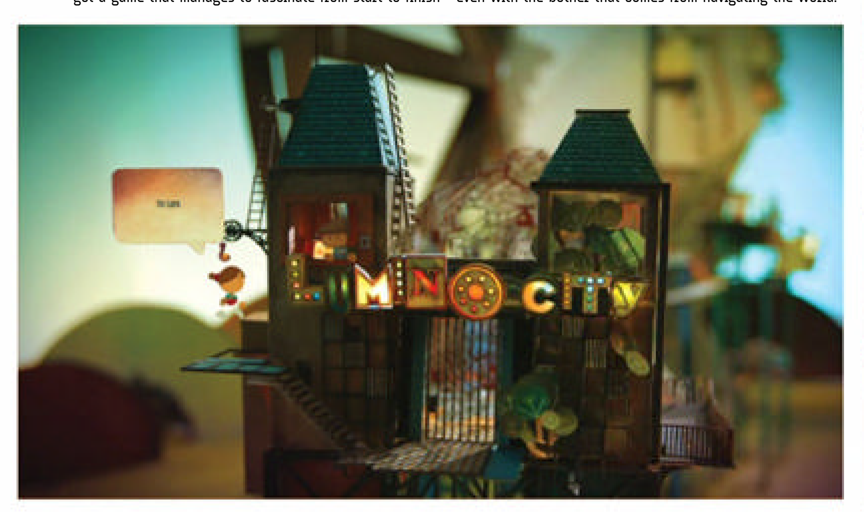
But, as is typical of games in the Mario universe, *Treasure Tracker*'s chirpy exterior hides a devilish challenge, although only for those who choose to take a completionist's approach to the game. The main goal, reaching a Star in each level, will prove somewhat easy for Nintendo veterans. But within each stage are three hidden gems which are often tucked away in significantly harder-to-reach nooks. Collecting these gems not only requires a great level of skill, but will add some much-needed replay value to a game that is over too soon.

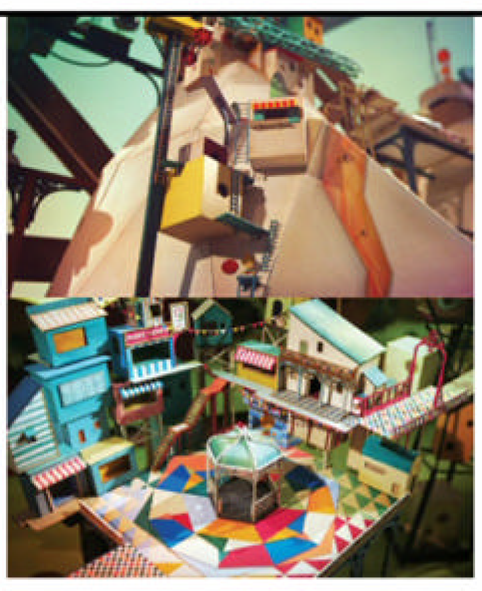
With over 70 levels, you get a decent wad of puzzles to stomp through at the lower-than-typical retail price. But, with no multiplayer options or alternative modes of play, once you're done with the roughly seven-hour campaign you have very little reason to return to it at all.

Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker may not be Nintendo Japan's best work, then. But it's testament to the consistently high bar that their platform developer's internal teams have set over the past few years. Even one of their somewhat lacking titles still manages to be one of the best games of early 2015, and yet another highlight of the Wii U's now flourishing game library.

VERDICT 7/10
SMALL QUIRKS HINDER AN OTHERWISE BEAUTIFUL PUZZLER

Below: Immediately the unique art style will draw you in. Combine this with some outstanding audio work and you've got a game that manages to fascinate from start to finish – even with the bother that comes from navigating the world.





DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: State Of Play Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.0 GHZ CPU, 2GB RAM
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN LUME



WORSE THAN MACHINARIUM

CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE

Lumino City

Captivating. That's probably the best way to describe *Lumino City*, and before it becomes bogged down in mechanics and direction and *problems*, it has you drawn in and breathless. The hand-crafted, stop motion animation aesthetic has you sworn from the very first second; it's a true, genuine labour of love as much as any can be. There's a real art to it – and not in a 'videogames are art' kind of way, but in that it is driven by a love of what it *is*, rather than what it *should be*.

That 'is', however, is a fairly typical point and click puzzle game, along the lines of *Machinarium* rather than *Broken Sword*. There is a narrative underpinning everything, but essentially you'll be navigating a series of rooms each with a problem to solve before moving on. There's a tactility to everything, too, made all the more pleasing thanks to its papercraft style. There's less to do with finding objects and using them in other places – though there is some of that – and instead about spinning pagodas, writing morse code with lighthouses or operating cranes to plug holes. There's a great amount of variety to the puzzles you'll encounter as well, and their immediacy in the gorgeous landscape – the folded structure that is Lumino City – makes everything feel like a joy to interact with.

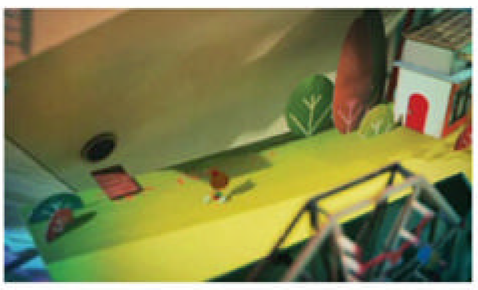
Except, that is, with some fairly irritating systems, which do sadly hold the game back. While the stop motion visuals make it a treat to watch – especially with the panning cameras and heavy use of depth of field – it has made for a fairly awkward means of navigating the admittedly fantastic backgrounds. There are only a handful of core 'spots' player character Lumi can situate herself in, and very little in between. Part and parcel of the way the game is presented, of course, but it means one wrong move and you'll need to sit through an unstoppable animation, made doubly irritating in knowing that this wasn't what you wanted to do.

While finding the necessary object to click on has long been a difficult bit of tedium to balance with this sort of game, *Lumino City* suffers greatly because of it. The criticism lying not in the having to find items, though, but instead the arduousness of having to move.

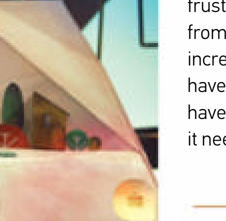
It really is a core problem when a game as delicious as this makes *watching* a fruitless and – often – painful task. It's not enough to quite stop *Lumino City* from being worth your time, to be honest, and it is still worth experiencing all the same – if not for the game, then to experience the art of it. Meta-gamers might be frustrated as the tiresome task of getting from one section to the next becomes increasingly irritating, but the puzzles will have you thinking and the art style will have you hooked. Sometimes, that's all it needs.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

HAND-CRAFTED: This isn't just a fancy visual effect; everything in Lumino City has been built and glued and made. It makes for a *very* original and dazzling game to play through.







VERDICT 7/10
WORTH IT TO WITNESS A PRODUCT OF PASSION

WE'RE GOING DOWN IN AN EARLIER ROUND...

Guilty Gear Xrd -Sign-

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Aksys Games
DEVELOPER: Arc System Works (Red Team)
PRICE: $59.99
RELEASE: TBA (Japan/US: Out now)
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Arc System Works isn't a normal developer. Its roster of fighting games (*Guilty Gear, BlazBlue, Persona 4 Arena* and so on) is a whole dossier of proof that fighting games have done *nowhere near* enough to innovate in the last few years. Arc System Works – in every game, across every franchise – manages to take existing mechanics or fighting character archetypes and deconstruct them, figuring out how *every* mechanic in a fighting game can be explored and injected into a single character.

The result is a hyper-kinetic fighting game that's as complex as it is satisfying; deceptively simple, the game will taunt you into mastering one of its rich characters by feeding you challenges that at first seem simple, but when opened up, become nigh-impossible for anyone but those versed in playing uber-technical fighting games. There are no character archetypes, not really: zoners, rush downs, pressure fighters and grapplers don't exist in their pure forms, but rather every character is some weird amalgam of at least three of the above. This results in a cast of bizarre, ostensibly Japanese characters – from the apparatus-bound Bedman to the dimension-shifting plastic surgeon Faust, there might not be a character that's to your usual 2D fighter choice, but somewhere along the line, you'll meet an avatar that *fits*. For us it was Slayer – the dandy vampire, naturally – because of his interesting array of launchers and down-to-the-millisecond charge times. Fairly simple to pick up, probably impossible to master: that's *Guilty Gear*'s appeal. Don't pick this up if you're expecting something casual to steadily chip away at – the game will take commitment.

There are 17 players if you count the DLC add-ons; some old, some new. We've been playing the game for weeks and barely feel confident enough with any to take them online... *Guilty Gear* will punish you if you ever *dare* to get cocky. If you're buying this game expecting a wealth of content, you'll be disappointed: there aren't a whole lot of modes (Story Mode is pointless, the 'dungeon crawling' type mode is basically just a big menu with fights in and the standard tutorial section clearly doesn't have the commitment sibling series *BlazBlue* has received in the

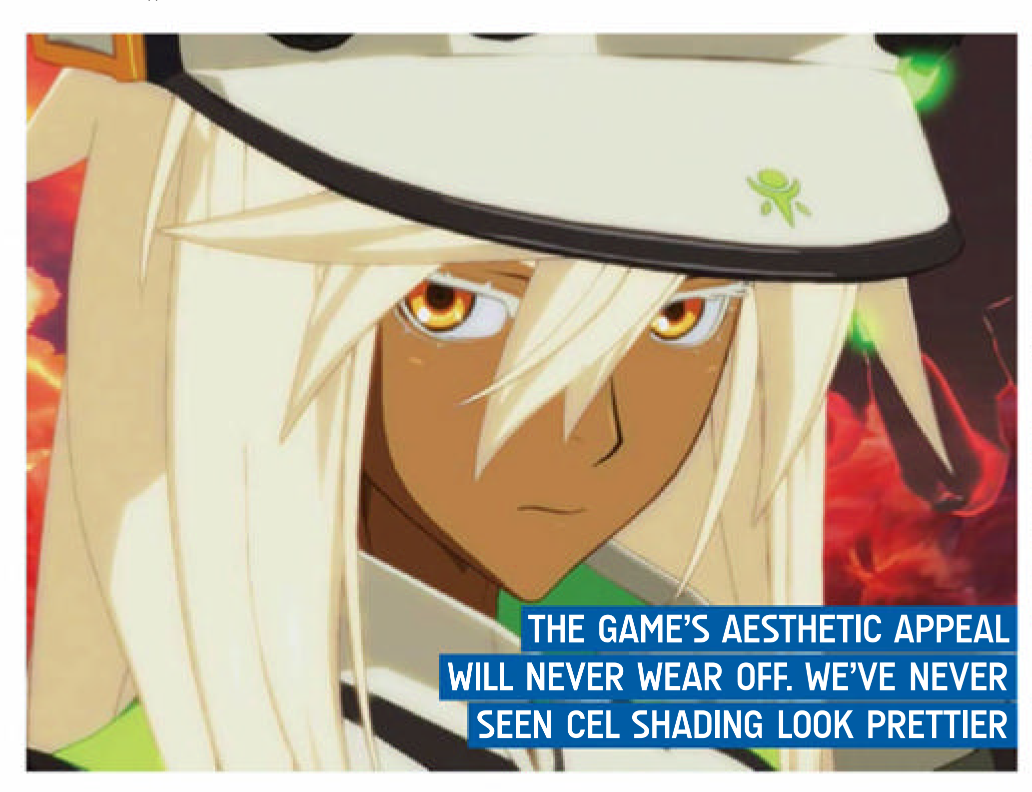
Right: Despite the 3D leanings, you can still tell this is a 2D game at its core: the UI elements allude to this particularly well.

Below: Performing certain impressive feats will reward you with medals at the end of a round – these can be used for bragging rights, but also provide perks in the devilish Survival Mode.



Above: Defeat poses will leave your character collapsed in a heap in the foreground – showing off how well put together the 3D models of each fighter are.

Below: Newcomer Ramlethal Valentine is typical of 2D fighter bosses: that is, she's irritating and difficult. Defeat her to unlock her, though, and then it all seems worth it – she's all over the screen, and very difficult to suppress.



THE GAME'S AESTHETIC APPEAL WILL NEVER WEAR OFF. WE'VE NEVER SEEN CEL SHADING LOOK PRETTIER



Above: The developer dropped dynamic lighting when it realised it would expose the polygon frame of each character – we're glad they did, the smoothness payoff is worth it.

99 STORIES HIGH AND STILL NO ROOF

The story mode in *Guilty Gear* is absolute nonsense. Usually, if you hit the 'Story' option from the main menu, you can expect some kind of sprawling, back-and-forth nonsense interrupted every now and then with a battle or two. *Xrd -Sign-* has no such structure: hit 'Story' and you'll just sit there for *about three hours* if you don't skip any text. The cinematic leaning of the game's art style should make that kind of okay, but it doesn't – the whole thing just drags as the characters blabber utter drivel at each other. You get a decent trophy for getting through it, but we'd recommend just leaving it on while you eat dinner or something. Don't try and watch the story – it'll make you less intelligent.

last few instalments). The character depth makes up for this in our opinion, but $60 is a lot to drop on an import if you're not interested in getting to know each character fairly intimately.

You might be sitting there for hours on end just trying to pull some of the more tedious combos off then, but at least the game's aesthetic appeal will never wear off. We've never seen anything prettier with a cel-shaded direction – it's simply amazing. When you consider the game has been built with Unreal Engine 3, too, it boggles the mind to think what Arc System Works could do on new-gen in Unreal 4.

More games need to adopt this art style – it looks better than a high-budget anime film, running in 1080p and 60fps. Functionally, it makes no difference to how *Guilty Gear* works as a 2D fighter, other than the camera will sometimes zoom in and take a more isometric view for Supers and Ultimates. Launchers, too, will force the camera to come in at an angle beneficial to the attacker, but it has very little bearing on how the game actually plays.

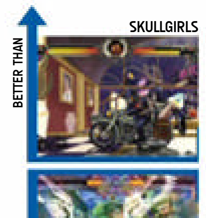
Better yet, the art team working with Arc System Works' head honcho and ideas man, Daisuke Ishiwatari, have excelled themselves. The world of *Guilty Gear* is

FAQs

Q. WILL I EVER PLATINUM THIS GAME?
Probably not. There are some crazy requirements for some of the top-tier trophies that'd elude even the top 1% of players.

Q. WHERE ARE MY OLD FAVOURITES?
Budget issues kept the devs from releasing with a full roster, but the studio has committed to bolstering content soon.

Q. WHAT'S THE BEST ULTIMATE MOVE?
Faust opts to change whoever he's operating on into a prettified anime version of themselves if his attack hits. So… that one.



admittedly inaccessible ('Why are there men with numbered bags on their heads floating in a circle under a mechanical Satan?' is a question we genuinely asked ourselves), but when all you're doing is wailing on some poor AI hiding in the corner, you can forgive that. The odd mix of Eighties heavy metal and the intentional misinterpretation of Judeo-Catholic mythology goes a long way to making *Guilty Gear* serious and camp, all at the same time, whilst resounding with this modern-gothic cadence that makes it stand out from any other fighter on the market.

Ishiwatari also heads up the game's soundtrack – the Eighties heavy metal influences carrying on from visual to sonic. When fighters' names and moves riff off rock pioneers like Slayer, Helloween, Metallica, Iron Maiden and Led Zepplin, you can expect a certain sort of soundtrack, too – wailing guitars, chugging chords and clean riffs pepper the OST and fit the over-the-top proclamations of DESTROYED when you win a match. The DualShock 4 will shout at you, too, if you win, pull off an Ultimate Move or do certain attacks. It's a bit intrusive, and adds insult to injury if you lose, but it's a nice touch.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SELL SHADING?: We want Arc System Works to put whatever it did to Unreal 3 up for licensing: we'd play anything that looks like this.

Some of the lobby options when finding an online match will leave you wanting – the game is cross-platform and that seems to mean some players experience a *lot* of lag in their matches. When you consider the game's insistence of frame-accurate moves and precise timing, it kind of invalidates any skill you have in an online match and results in players resorting to lag exploits… incredibly frustrating when such tactics could be brutally punished in a local game.

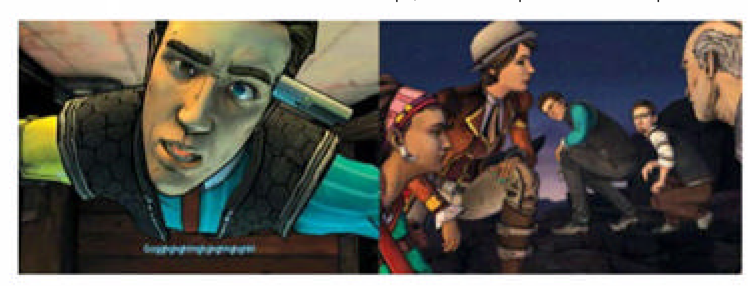
Guilty Gear Xrd -Sign- is the first fighter on PlayStation 4, and has proved that the genre still has a vibrant place on home consoles. The game has set a bar for visual excellence as far as anime-inspired games go, and is liable to have the same kind of impact *Tekken Tag Tournament* did on PS2 thanks to its careful place as a launch title. If *Guilty Gear* can attract a big enough audience this early on, we might even see a serious contender to *Street Fighter* (as far as 2D games go) this generation. It really is that much fun.

VERDICT 8/10
A GREAT START TO THE NEW-GEN FIGHTING GAME MOVEMENT

"I HAVE THE SHINIEST MEAT BICYCLE!"

Tales From The Borderlands Episode 1: Zer0 Sum

Below: The eclectic class of idiots you'll accumulate through the first episode of Telltale's latest adventure are all unique, if not a little... predictable... in their personalities.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC, Xbox 360, PS3, Mac, iOS
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Telltale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £3.99 / Season Pass £13.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

***Borderlands* has always had a very precise sense of humour – somewhere between self-aware self-deprecation, cultural criticism, and a flurry of dirty jokes.** Thing is, the delivery of this humour can fall a little flat in the main games because you're so busy looting everything and shooting people in the face that you can easily miss a lot.

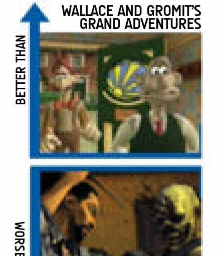
So Telltale's interpretation of Gearbox's dystopian Wild Western world works. Given free reign to do what it likes on Pandora, Telltale proves that it can do serious and emotional (*The Walking Dead*, *Game Of Thrones*) just as well as it can do high-camp space dandy comedy. *Tales From The Borderlands* is like the *Ocean's Eleven* trilogy of films set in space, with Soderberg replaced by James Gunn, and Clooney and company replaced with the cast of *Family Guy* (actually, Patrick 'Joe Swanson' Warburton *does* voice primary antagonist Vasquez in the game).

Telltale's visual style works wonders with the ink outlines and bold colours of the *Borderlands* aesthetic, although the facial expressions and animations feel more Sim-like this time – exaggerated and false, more cartoony than is perhaps called for. Some of the dialogue choices, too, feel comedically off – favouring easy jokes instead of any actual character-focused choices.

The illusion of choice that's present (and understandable) in most other Telltale games just feels cheap in *Tales From The Borderlands* – you'll play practically the same story, no matter what you do. This is a shame, because there's some incredibly smart story framing at work during the first episode. As the action ramps up, everything quickly gets out of hand: you collect a ragtag band of con artists and strong personalities (even if they *are* all archetypes), and meet the eponymous Zer0 – which is the icing on the cake of a fantastic selection of fan-service offered up by Telltale.

As the industry moves towards the proliferation of episodic content, we're going to see more endeavours like this – mid-range affairs using established franchises to bounce off, satiating gamers' appetites for their favourite games whilst the parent studios are busy chiselling away at the newest prequel, sequel or tie-in. That's not a bad thing – *Tales From The Borderlands* is a fantastic proof of concept... it's just not as engaging or game-changing as the other cinematic episodes Telltale has been putting out over the last three years.

BETTER THAN
WALLACE AND GROMIT'S GRAND ADVENTURES



WORSE THAN
THE WALKING DEAD: SEASON ONE

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

BREAKING YOUR FUNNY BONE: *Borderlands'* unique brand of flavour is communicated well by Telltale, especially the events preceding summoning a Power Loader from your orbiting space-base...

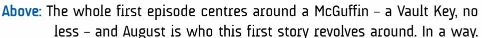




VERDICT 6/10

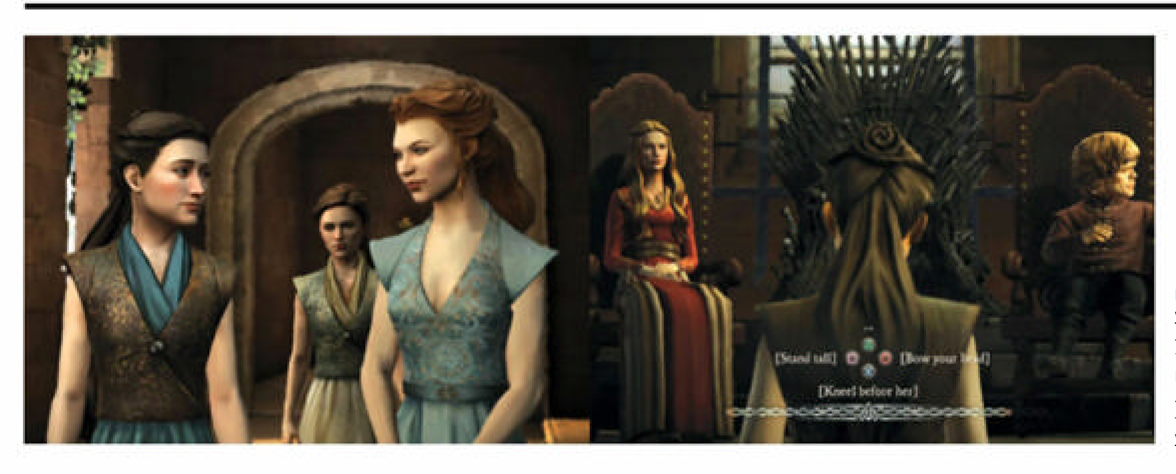
PREDICTABLE AND GLITCHY AS ALL GET OUT, IT'S STILL FUN





Above: The whole first episode centres around a McGuffin – a Vault Key, no less – and August is who this first story revolves around. In a way.





Left: One scene will take you to the Iron Throne room, where you'll have to butt heads with Lena Headey's fantastic interpretation of Cersei – who's as stern as you'd expect.

GEORGE R. R. MARTIN WILL REMEMBER THAT

Game Of Thrones, Episode 1: Iron From Ice

We'll say straight away – if you're part way through the *Game Of Thrones* series (novels or TV) there will be spoilers in this review. You have been warned.

Now that's taken care of, the next pressing matter is how to address 'the Telltale problem'. The developer is already synonymous with watertight, emotive storytelling, and moving its fiction to Westeros does little to dampen that narrative mastery. In fact, operating in George R. R. Martin's world just gives the studio room to be as deliciously brutal as it likes. The thing is, all that artisan writing is undermined by a glitchy engine and a watercolour art direction that – for all its artistic aspirations – just ends up looking smudgy and clumsy.

For a game that's entirely on-rails, featuring mostly static scenes, it surprises us that Telltale couldn't invest in graphics that pump a bit more life into the stoic character models (though this is probably because Telltale is so keen on releasing on *every* platform possible). But the actors make up for what life is lost in the dull, doll eyes of Telltale's pastel interpretations.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC, Xbox 360, PS3, Mac, iOS
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Telltale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £4 / Season Pass £12
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

THE WOLF AMONG US: SEASON ONE





AS GOOD AS

THE WALKING DEAD: SEASON TWO

Iron From Ice takes place in Ironrath, focusing on the House Forrester, completely new characters within the fiction that slide into the established character's arcs with ease. Returning characters (Cersei, Margaery, Ramsay Snow and Tyrion) are all voiced by their respective television actors, and as such the scenes are as loaded with as much tension. Their likenesses are instantly recognisable, too – cartoonified for the sake of Telltale's aesthetic, but losing nothing in their trademark looks en route.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

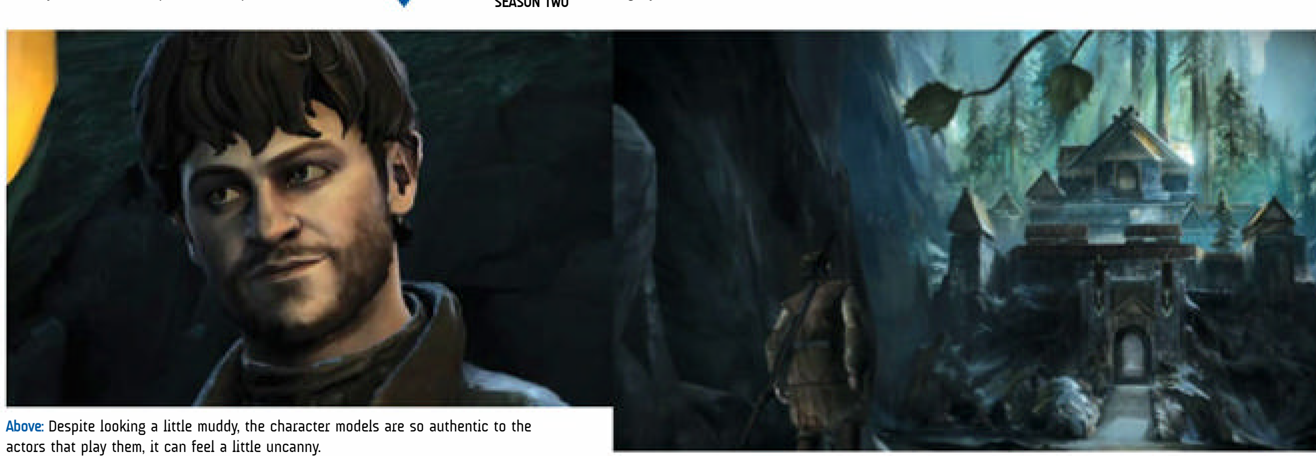
CANON FIRE: Telltale's decision to focus on House Forrester means that you can indulge in the game without worrying about how you're affecting the events in the main canon.

This new House is established fantastically – you play as a squire loyal to the land, the Forrester's newest Lord, and a handmaiden sent to King's Landing. From these three perspectives, you're given a well-rounded view of the Forrester's place in the world – their main resource are the Ironwood trees that populate their lands, and the first episode largely focuses on how the House wants to use this wooden currency to curry favour with the Boltons, who have just come to be Wards of the North (the game is set just after the Red Wedding).

As with all of Telltale's recent output, *Iron From Ice* is a gripping first episode, and a solid introduction to a new series. For a one-off payment of £4, it's fantastic value for money – any *Game Of Thrones* fan will get a kick from seeing how Telltale's new characters interact with the established names in Martin's universe. It's a fantastically loyal homage to the parent texts, and once again proves that no-one can do licensed narrative experiences like Telltale. Twists and turns pepper the story, and a typically *Game Of Thrones* ending flesh out a gripping, if glitchy and graphically underwhelming, adventure.

VERDICT 8/10

AUTHENTIC AND BOLD, IT'S TELLTALE ALL OVER



Above: Despite looking a little muddy, the character models are so authentic to the actors that play them, it can feel a little uncanny.

THE DIFFICULT SECOND ALBUM

Scrolls





Above: There are a lot of mechanics to be thinking about, but not in an overbearing way – it's all manageable right up until the point the opposing player poisons your strongest unit and wipes away all of the weaker ones in a single turn.

It's hard to forget in the blind lust the world has for *Hearthstone* that it is perhaps the simplest, easiest collectible card game out there. That has been its boon, of course, and the resulting popularity courtesy of its accessibility is undoubted well earned, even if there are those who prefer their deck-building a little more complex. *Scrolls* is *Minecraft*-maker Mojang's attempt at what should perhaps be described as a burgeoning genre, and in many ways it succeeds in being a step up from its rival, the high school to *Hearthstone*'s elementary. Here resource control is more in the vein of *Magic: The Gathering*, with manual resource gains rather than per-turn automatic gains seen in *Hearthstone*. And, as with *MtG*, there are multiple resource types with which you can draw from, allowing you to mix and match your playstyle with far greater variety than *Hearthstone* could ever allow.

Each match plays out in a familiar format: one player picks a card to cast a spell, summon a unit or enhance those already active. The objective here is to destroy at least three of the five totems sitting at the end of each row in a health system not dissimilar to the phenomenal *Might & Magic: Clash Of Heroes*. A series of tutorials and – after that – trials help educate you in the more complex intricacies of its mechanics, earning you gold all the while and giving you the skills to take on AI opponents. The problem comes in taking the battle online, where it's already apparent that – with such a finite user base for the game – you're unlikely to find an opponent with a similar level of skill and cards. The nature-focused 'Growth' set is robust, easy-to-learn and insular – and so in theory the perfect starter deck. But when faced with other builds – such as the debilitating Decay set or the sturdy Order pack – you'll more likely face exceptional, even unfair, odds that no amount of strategising or luck can overcome. It's a question of balance, certainly, but the real worry comes from whether newcomers are willing to continue putting in the time when constantly encountering players whose decks are far more considered and well-versed than their own.

Scrolls does offer a little extra over *Hearthstone* in terms of financing: greater rewards for playing against AI, for example, means you can work towards that deck and still get something out of the game. There are more options in picking the types of cards you want, a must if the game is to enable newer gamers. While its an advancement on *Hearthstone* mechanically, if *Hearthstone* is the standard for the genre these days, then invariably *Scrolls* becomes one for CCG veterans only.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Mojang
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: $5.00
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.6 GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, 700MB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
YI-GI-OH ZEXAL: WORLD DUEL CARNIVAL

WORSE THAN
HEARTHSTONE

MISSING LINK

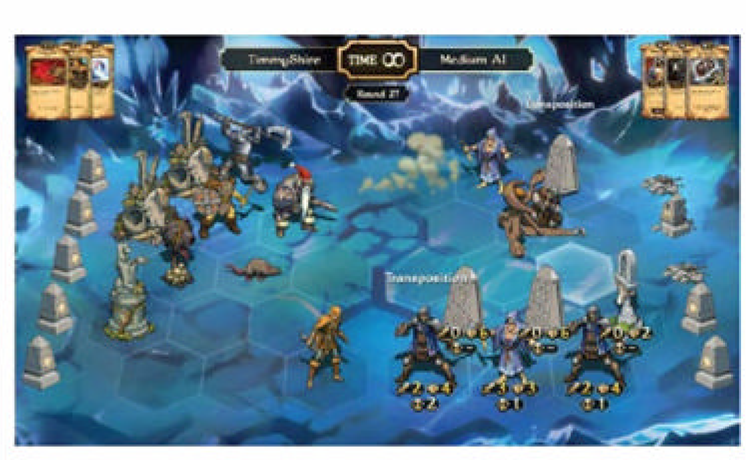
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

JOIN US: If *Scrolls* is to ride the *Hearthstone* wave then it needs its online sessions to be more forgiving for newcomers. Newbie-only matches or better beginner card balancing would help.

VERDICT 7/10
A MIDDLE GROUND BETWEEN HEARTHSTONE AND MTG

Below: Deck management is intimidating, especially since it's the one aspect the tutorials don't seem to cover. It'll take a stoic mind to unravel that fear of putting together a viable pack of *at least* 50 cards for a deck, let alone gathering cards from other sets.







Left: Randal's not the only detestable character in the game, with weird, wacky and downright disgusting parts from his cast of NPCs. The voice acting isn't the best either, truth be told, which is part of the reason it becomes so hard to feel any attachment to these awful people.



Right: There are hundreds of pop culture and videogame references littered throughout, but they're not offered up with any real panache. It ends up feeling a little cloying, as though it's trying to convince players how cool and referential it is.

I WANT TO SHOOT THE WHOLE DAY DOWN

Randal's Monday

When it comes to the modern games industry being different is good, being different is *necessary*. Whether it's in terms of mechanics, art style or even the characters you use, any ways you can stand out from the crowd should be capitalised on.

With regards to *Randal's Monday*, that difference is its eponymous player character, the lynchpin around which it's entire design was built; his name is in the title, after all. Here's a character completely devoid of any compelling traits: he's an alcoholic, a kleptomaniac, a sociopath – a horrible person. And that's the difference, because for a change you're not playing the typical wholesome-yet-sarky good guy.

Sadly that's about all that *is* changed with *Randal's Monday*, leaving a fairly rote point-and-click adventure game. That, in itself, is not a criticism – no one can complain about a lack of change if none was promised – but it holds the game back from being anything special. The characters and the events that happen might act as enough of a foundation to draw you in, but the problem with detestable characters is that they have absolutely no redeeming qualities. That's the point, obviously, but it's an extremely difficult balancing act to make a horrible person enjoyable. Randal is far more the former than the latter, more Withnail than he is I. The game suffers as a result, but that's not it's biggest downfall.

It's sort of the deathknell of any point-and-click adventure game when you can't solve its tasks through logic or smarts. It's one thing to suffer through a personal lack of cognitive capabilities, another entirely when the resolution to a problem is nonsensical. It's not true of *all* of *Randal's Monday* puzzles admittedly, but far too often you're forced into clicking on every single possible item on-screen or methodically combining each inventory object with another. It's a tiresome means of puzzle solving that the genre has – for the most part – outgrown. And if it's meant to be played for laughs, the joke falls flat with repetition.

It's a shame, too, because *Randal's Monday* otherwise had potential. Its *Family Guy*-esque visual style lends itself well to the kinds of debauched, nutjobbery you'll encounter with each new screen and though it might try a little too hard to fit endless gaming and pop culture references in there – in a way *Sunset Overdrive* was rightly criticised for – it could've made for a fairly enjoyable time waster for genre fans. It's as though the idea of Randal – and his Monday – were conceived ahead of the puzzles or problems you'll need to figure out. Combine this with the fact that its crude tone will be so divisive makes for a game that doesn't really fit into any potential buyer's list.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Spain
PUBLISHER: Daedalic Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Nexus Game Studios
PRICE: £18.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.2 GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, 256MB GPU, 8.5GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: LEISURE SUIT LARRY RELOADED



WORSE THAN: BROKEN SWORD 5

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

MONDAY, BLOODY MONDAY: The depraved Randal makes his character known from the very start and though it's hard to *be* him – even when you pick dialogue options – he is at least original.

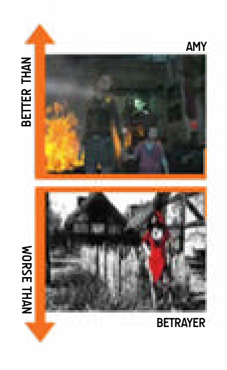
VERDICT 5/10
A PASSABLE IF SOMETIMES ILLOGICAL POINT-AND-CLICK

AN EXPERIMENT IN EMPTINESS

Into Blue Valley

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Kuchalu
DEVELOPER: In-House
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7, 1.80GHz processor, 2GB RAM, video card with 2GB of VRAM, DirectX version 11, 2GB hard drive space



The best thing about *Into Blue Valley* is the concept on which it's built. This is a "found footage" game, in which a couple of young men (with the same names as the developers) watch and discuss a VHS that the player directs. As you control the cameraman, the viewers narrate his actions, sometimes in response and sometimes in expectation, as when the one who's already watched the tape informs you that the cameraman will collect eight "relics" from the abandoned village and snowy surrounding environment he's about to explore.

Unfortunately, the effect is let down on multiple fronts. The narrators wonder why the relics glow white in the recording, but rather than mitigate the dissonance of that particularly gamey feature their discussion just brings it to the forefront. Sometimes, if you trigger an event without realising and then turn the camera away, the narrators will end up pointing out something that isn't actually on screen. Worst, there's no voice acting, which has the doubly negative effect of lowering the potential realism of the setup and making it more likely you'll miss the narration.

The comments are somewhat helpful if you've missed one of the relics, but the information is so vague – "I remember that he's going to end up coming back down this way later because he's forgotten something" – that you'll end up walking in circles trying to find it.

The aesthetic doesn't help there either. The CRT-style display, with its horizontal lines and curved corners, has a few neat touches – the camcorder frosts up if the cameraman is outside for too long (something the narrators discuss), and the battery life indicator marks your progress through the game – but it doesn't take long for that bright blue and white snowy view to become boring, if not painful, to look at. The music, too, seems intended to be atmospheric but soon becomes repetitive.

Fortunately, even those determined to finish the game will likely only have to trudge through the bleak blue/white world for less than an hour before they've found all eight relics and triggered the ending. Unfortunately, the conclusion answers none of the questions raised by the various notes left by the absent villagers, and doesn't even have the decency to raise any interesting questions itself. Even the narrators seem generally disinterested, which doesn't make it any more convincing that two young men would sit through an hour-long VHS about a man picking up things in a village.

Into Blue Valley is an experimental first release from Kuchalu, but that doesn't excuse its lack of substance. Basic building blocks can still be used to tell a worthwhile story. The narrated "found footage" was a novel idea, but the developers should have held onto it until they had something interesting to say.

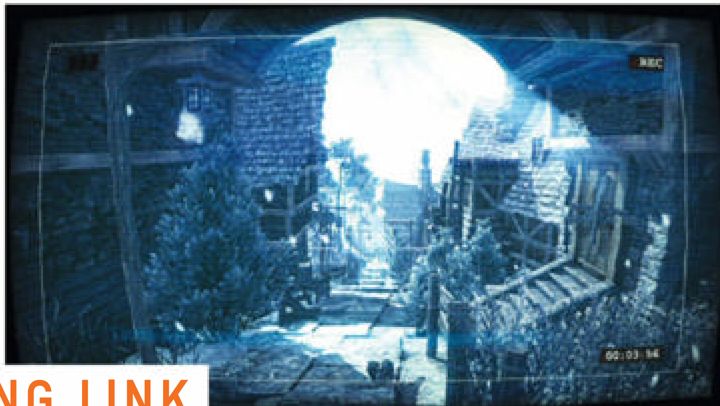
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TELL US A TALE: There's barely a story here, and certainly no sense of resolution. Players need a reason to be glad they've spent even a short hour walking around this wintry world.



Above: You'll know you're nearing the end of the game when the battery indicator in the top left corner of the camcorder screen goes red. Don't expect a fulfilling conclusion, however. You may well wish this battery had run out sooner.





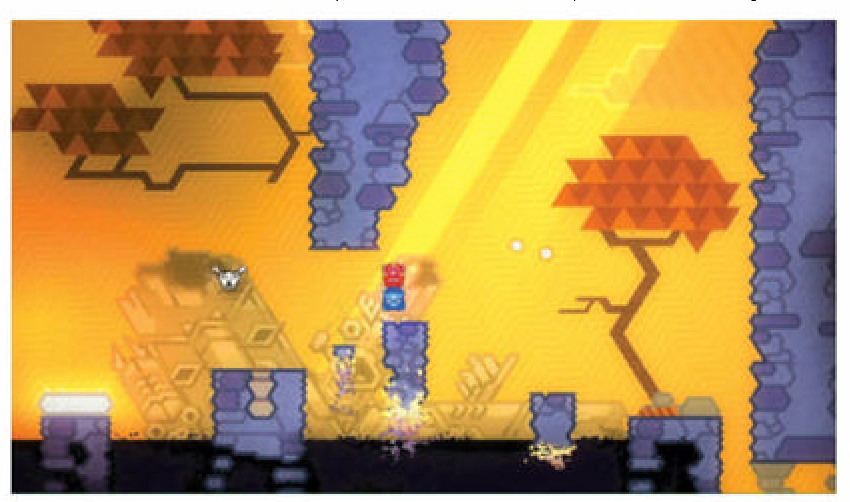
Above: It can't be a coincidence that the village in this game is called Blue Valley. While painful on the eyes, however, that bright aesthetic does help to hide the fact that tree branches poke through fences and grass grows through rocks.



VERDICT 3/10

THIS FOUND FOOTAGE SHOULD'VE STAYED LOST

Below: The single-player campaign is split into three sections – Underworld, Middleworld, and Upperworld – and each has a different theme and colour palette, as well as a different colour pair of totems to lead through its levels.





DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: Denmark
PUBLISHER: Press Play
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
BROTHERS: A TALE OF TWO SONS

WORSE THAN
SUPER MARIO GALAXY 2

SYNCHRONISED SOLUTIONS FOR PLATFORMING PUZZLES

Kalimba

***Kalimba* is a puzzle platformer based on one simple mechanic: you control two avatars instead of one.** Nudge the analog stick right, and both will move right; tap the jump button, and both will jump. On top of this, Press Play has layered different uses of that basic mechanic, one level at a time, to create a wonderfully satisfying whole.

For instance, the avatars here are totems, and so they can stack. Each cannot pass through areas the colour of its companion. One button switches their positions. Later levels include switches that reverse gravity. At all times your job is simply to keep an eye on both totems and use the shape of the level to coax them into appropriate positions to progress, but periodic sections become puzzles for which figuring out the solution creates a powerful sense of flow.

The visual and sound design emphasise that feeling. The tokens that lie along your totems' path chime as you collect them. The music picks up when your totems move, instruments dropping out whenever you come to a halt. Each jump lands with a satisfying clop, and the totems themselves make small sounds at pertinent moments, perhaps squalling if you lead them too close to destruction, their little faces expressive despite their basic geometry.

So when your stacked totems skid wide-eyed along an icy surface, jump and twirl in the air to avoid some obstacle, before landing like self-satisfied figure skaters, it feels like they're getting as much pleasure out of it as you are. It's delightful and funny, especially when played with an audience, when success can be a fluke and failure a spectacular fumble accompanied by your totems' panicked squawks.

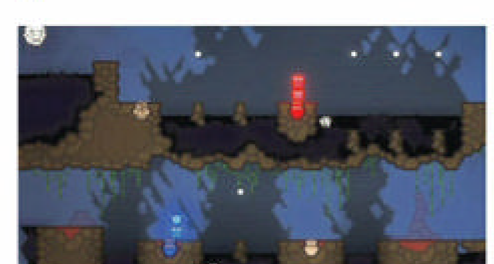
That sense of shared humour will be tested in the local co-op campaign, in which two players control two totems each. But the narrator Hoebear, called a "Metabear" because he knows that he's in a game, keeps the mood light by reminding you that friendship is more important than winning (even if it is better not to be a loser). As in the single-player campaign, his meta commentary is succinct and well-delivered enough that it never tilts too far from helpful and into annoying.

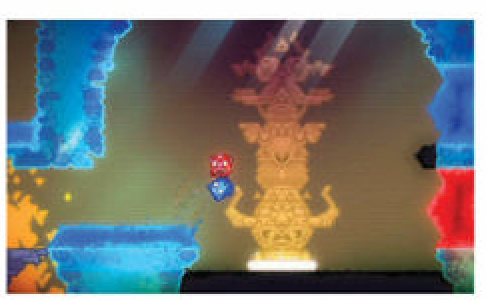
Co-op is just something of a distraction, however. The core of the game is in the single-player, in which it's far more likely you'll be able to negotiate the risk/reward trade-off that gives you a point for every token collected but takes one away for every death. With completion of each level winning you a new totem for your pole, undecorated logs for a low score and gold totems for maximum, there's a quantifiable excuse to go back and learn the perfect pathways through each. In this case, however, the journey itself is its own reward.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

DUAL-WIELD: *Kalimba*'s core mechanic is basic but brilliant. That both totems respond to your input means you need to use the shape of the level to coax each into position.





Above: The co-op campaign feels slower, with more time needed to think and communicate. As well as your own two totems, you have to keep your eye on those of the other player. If one totem comes to harm, all four are destroyed.



A WONDERFULLY COMPLETE PACKAGE



> "It had a manual that was over 100 pages long, so in between playing the game I'd read the manual. You know, I'd be like sitting on the toilet reading this huge thing!"

PHIL ROBB, TURTLE ROCK, CO-FOUNDER/CREATIVE DIRECTOR



WHY I ♥...

UFO: ENEMY UNKNOWN (A.K.A X-COM: UFO DEFENSE)

PHIL ROBB, TURTLE ROCK, CO-FOUNDER/ CREATIVE DIRECTOR

"I grew up as a console gamer – we never had computers or anything in my house – but I did have Nintendo, Atari and all that. I started in games professionally in 1994, and that was the year I believe X-COM came out. That was the first time I had money to buy a computer – you know, a PC. And X-COM was the first game I got for that computer.

I remember being amazed at how deep PC games were compared to console games at the time, and X-COM is the perfect example of that. It had a manual that was over 100 pages long, so in between playing the game I'd read the manual. You know, I'd be like sitting on the toilet reading this huge thing, and I just remember that being such an awesome feeling; all this detail was a revelation. People that went back to play it later on were always like 'Holy shit, this is a complicated game!' and that's probably why I love it so much [laughter]."

RETRO

NO.157



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THE RETRO GUIDE TO… Resident Evil©

Resident Evil is arguably one of Capcom's biggest franchises, establishing survival horror as a legitimate genre by combining thrilling scares with tense action

WHILE CAPCOM'S SUPERB game didn't really create the survival horror genre, despite arguments made by those who love the series, it's arguably responsible for creating many of the tropes that gamers associate with it. The franchise itself has gone through some interesting twists and turns since it was first created in 1996 and has gone on to become one of Capcom's most successful franchises, selling over 60 million units. With the recent release of *Resident Evil HD* and the incoming episodic release of *Revelations 2* we felt it was the perfect time to revisit the popular series. Prepare to enter survival horror…

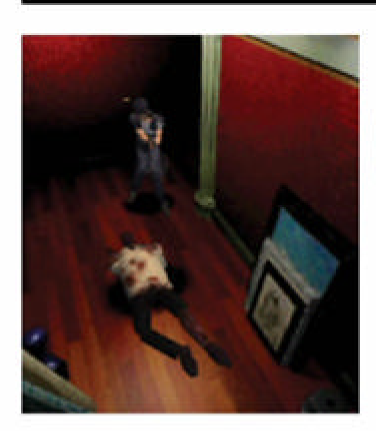


RESIDENT EVIL 1996

VARIOUS

Capcom's *Resident Evil* not only introduced some of the franchise's most memorable characters – Chris Redfield, Jill Valentine and Albert Wesker – but also cemented many of the mechanics that would become integral to the series for years to come. Tank-like controls, hilariously silly dialogue, careful item management, limited resources, A-to-B puzzles and tense pacing all combined to deliver a satisfyingly mature game that really helped Sony's console stand apart from the crowd.

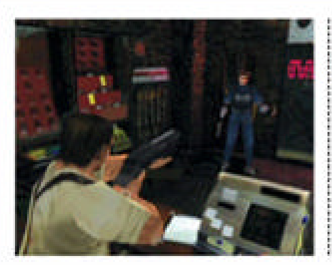
The pre-rendered visuals created a creepily atmospheric vibe that made exploring the Spencer mansion a terrifying experience. It's an expertly crafted game from Shinji Mikami, who had previously cut his teeth on various child friendly fare including *Aladdin* and *Goof Troop*. *Resident Evil* (or *Biohazard* as it was known in Japan) arguably saw the up-and-coming director grow up and the genre grew up right beside him.

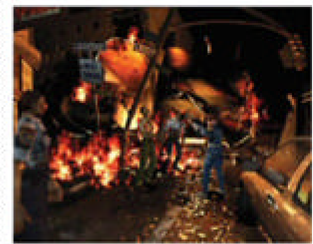


RESIDENT EVIL: DIRECTOR'S CUT 1997

PLAYSTATION

There are actually two versions of *Director's Cut* – one that supports DualShock and one that doesn't. The game itself is a solid update of the original featuring a new Beginner's mode, as well as an Arranged version, which featured a new location for key items, new clothes for each character and a much more powerful gun.





RESIDENT EVIL 2 1998

VARIOUS

It's telling that the two best *Resident Evil* games both feature Leon S Kennedy. Set two months after the events of the first game, Capcom's sequel further establishes the convoluted plot that the series would become famous for, but greatly ramps up virtually every aspect of the game. The locations are larger, with the vast majority of the game taking place in Raccoon City's police station, while the visuals are greatly improved, matched by a simply stunning soundtrack.

Resident Evil 2 focuses on two characters, Leon S Kennedy and Claire Redfield and is spread across two discs. Interestingly, while both scenarios are often set in the same locations, their puzzles and storylines change dramatically, greatly adding to the filmic atmosphere that director Hideki Kamiya wanted to create. *Resident Evil 2* also introduced support characters, including the infamous Ada Wong, who appear at certain points of the adventure and are occasionally playable. It's also memorable for being the first game in the series to give you visual clues to your character's current health status: handy, as it's not an easy game. Interestingly, Capcom's sequel started off as a completely different game, which was scrapped a good way into its development when producer Shinji Mikami decided it was too boring.

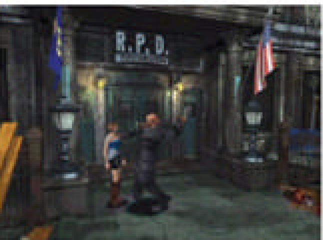
RESIDENT EVIL 3: NEMESIS 1999

VARIOUS

Some consider *Nemesis* to be something of a back step for the series, but it introduced many key mechanics, most notably the incredibly useful 180-degree turn and a handy dodge attack. Both new moves are particularly useful as you'll need as much agility as you can muster in order to deflect the continual assaults of the *Nemesis* of the title, a huge bio-mechanically created creature that comes equipped with a rocket launcher, absorbs bullets like a cheap sponge and continually chases Jill Valentine (the only selectable character) during key points of the game.

Yes it's more linear than the previous games, but the assaults of *Nemesis*, the ability to craft ammunition and being able to use oil drums to create explosive damage to nearby enemies makes the game far more action-packed as a result. Oh, and it introduces the mini-game 'The Mercenaries – Operation: Mad Jackal'.



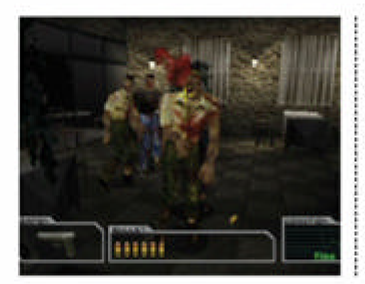




RESIDENT EVIL SURVIVOR 2000

PLAYSTATION

Survivor was Capcom's first spin-off from the main games and it's not a good one. Unlike previous titles it's essentially a lightgun game, but one where you have free movement. Things get slightly easier when using a lightgun, but it remains a fiddly experience due to the clunky controls. It's a pity the gameplay is so laborious, as *Survivor* actually makes a good attempt at transferring the *Resi* universe into a first-person world. Interestingly, the US version of the game lacks lightgun support, meaning you'll have to rely on the piggish joypad controls.



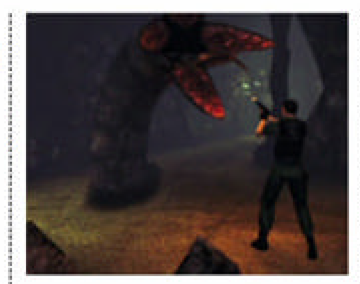


RESIDENT EVIL: CODE: VERONICA 2000

DREAMCAST

Code: Veronica never seems to get the love it deserves, possibly because it was the first *Resi* game to not originally appear on a Sony console. It's the first game in the series to use 3D backgrounds and a movable camera and occasionally switches to first-person when using certain weapons. While mechanically it's very much business as usual, the ability to pick up and use herbs when your inventory is full does make a huge difference, particularly as *Code: Veronica* is quite a tough *Resident Evil* game. Like *Resident Evil 2* it takes place across numerous locations and features extras once the game is completed. In this case it's the rather enjoyable Battle Game, which feels like an early precursor to the excellent Mercenaries mode of *Resident Evil 4*.





RESIDENT EVIL: CODE: VERONICA X 2000

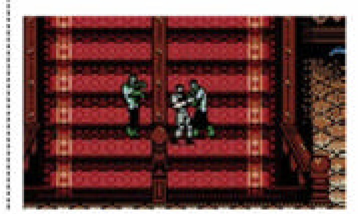
VARIOUS

Despite the controversy of *Code: Veronica*'s Dreamcast release, it wasn't long before the PS2 got its own version. It's largely the same game, with slightly improved visuals and additional cutscenes that focus on the increasing popularity of Albert Wesker. It also features an additional DVD called 'Wesker's Report', which delves deeper into the shady character. It received a HD re-release in 2011.

RESIDENT EVIL GAIDEN 2001

GAME BOY COLOR

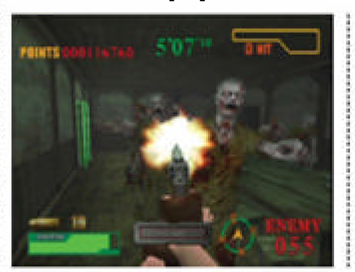
Gaiden was predominantly created by British developer M2, making it the first title in the series to be created outside Japan. It's also nowhere near as bad as reports suggest, thanks to a huge tanker to explore, Barry Burton getting some much needed limelight as one of the main characters, and a slick combat system that switches to first-person whenever the player engages zombies. Yes it was never going to capture the atmosphere of the PlayStation original, but *Gaiden* remains a resoundingly solid adventure game.



RESIDENT EVIL SURVIVOR 2 CODE: VERONICA 2001

VARIOUS

The second *Survivor* game is a notable improvement, but still lacks the sheer visceral thrills of Sega's *House Of The Dead* series. Based on *Code: Veronica*, players control Claire Redfield or Steve Burnside and can use both lightguns and joypads. In addition to featuring two unique modes: Dungeon and Arcade, *Survivor 2* also introduces partner assistance, in the form of a computer-controlled player that will lay down cover fire for you. There's also a timer that introduces the Nemesis from *Resident Evil 3* if players dawdle for too long.



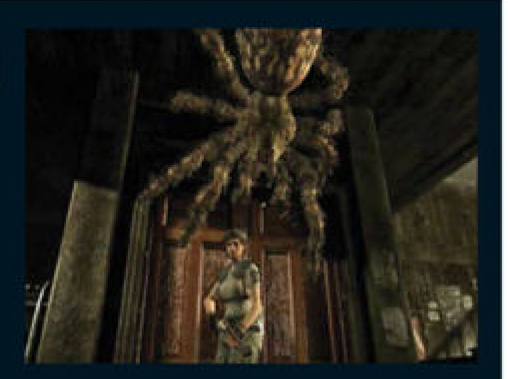


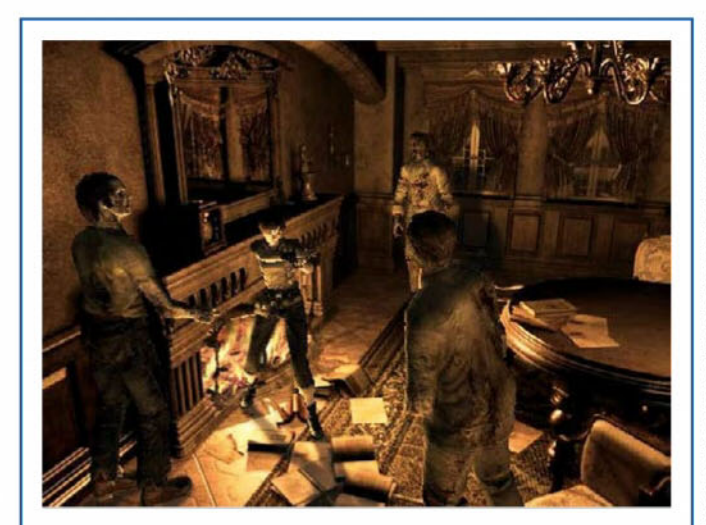
RESIDENT EVIL REMAKE 2002

GAMECUBE

When Capcom revealed that its next brace of *Resident Evil* games, including *Resident Evil 4*, would be exclusive to the GameCube there was uproar. Capcom saved face, however, with this astonishing update of the original game that remains one of the best remakes of recent times. In addition to astonishing visuals, *Resident Evil* on GameCube is retrofitted with many of the later Resi mechanics, including the 180-degree turn and the ability to judge a character's health based on its onscreen actions.

It includes several new areas that were cut from the original game, equips Jill and Chris with handy defensive weapons and introduces the dreaded Crimson Head Zombies – extremely fast and dangerous foes that replace those zombies that weren't fully destroyed by the player on their first encounter. It was re-released on Wii in 2009, but adds very little over the original GameCube release.

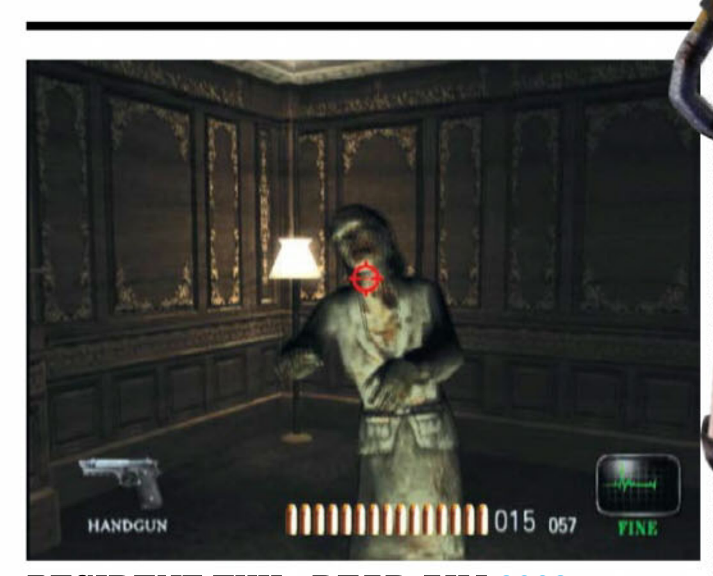




RESIDENT EVIL ZERO 2002

GAMECUBE

Many don't like *Zero*, possibly because it has a far more insectoid theme than previous games, with zombies taking a noticeable backseat to giant scorpions, giant centipedes and other creepy crawlies. By far the best feature of *Zero* is its excellent Partner Zapping mechanic that lets the player switch between both characters at will. Rebecca Chambers is versatile but weak, while prisoner Billy Coen is built like a tank and can use a lighter and push heavy objects. Both characters' abilities must be combined together to complete the many puzzles thrown at you, making it a unique addition to the series. Originally planned for the N64's ill-fated 64DD, it was switched to the N64, before eventually resurfacing on the Cube. A lazy Wii port showed up in 2008.



RESIDENT EVIL: DEAD AIM 2003

PLAYSTATION 2

The last game in the *Survivor* series is easily the best, but it still falls massively short of the quality found in the main series. It's the first game in the series to combine both first-person and third-person views, but is still hampered by the same grid-based control system that made the earlier games such a pain to control. It certainly looks pretty, with impressive visuals and the ability to move and shoot makes it stand apart from many of the other games in the series, but it's still a bland mishmash of genres.

RESIDENT EVIL OUTBREAK 2003

PLAYSTATION 2

Plans for *Outbreak* had circled around the Capcom offices for a good five years before the game became a reality. It's an interesting addition to the series, featuring online play, a large number of characters (eight, in fact) and five unique scenarios to fight through. Sadly, the ability to play with three other players was completely stripped from the PAL version of the game, making for a horrendously frustrating experience, as you often find yourself ill-equipped to deal with the large number of zombies the game throws at you. Mechanically it's exactly what you'd expect from a *Resident Evil* game, but the pacing, carefully placed scares and strong boss encounters are nowhere to be seen.



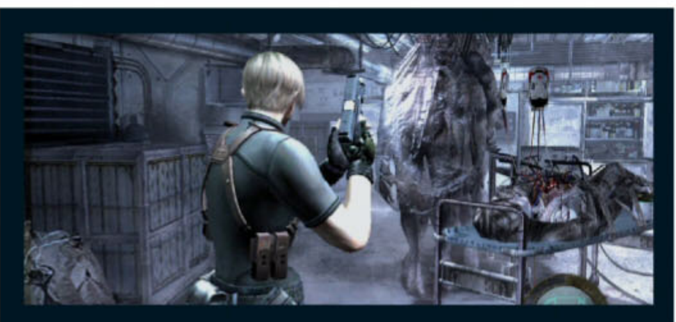
RESIDENT EVIL OUTBREAK FILE 2 2004

PLAYSTATION 2

Outbreak's sequel is awesome because it features zombie elephants. Okay, so it's not incredible, but it's a far better structured game than *Outbreak* thanks to better balance, more interesting scenarios and numerous little tweaks to the gameplay. The original eight characters return and this time PAL users got to experience full online play. Despite both games having their servers pulled by Capcom, fans have kept the Japanese versions going on private servers.



"WHEN CAPCOM REVEALED THAT ITS NEXT BRACE OF RESIDENT EVIL GAMES WOULD BE EXCLUSIVE TO THE GAMECUBE, THERE WAS UPROAR"



RESIDENT EVIL 4 2005

VARIOUS

Shinji Mikami's sequel is quite possibly one of the most important games of the last ten years. In addition to breathing fresh life into the series, it reinvented action games and the third-person shooter, influencing the likes of *Gears Of War* and *Dead Space*.

Mikami essentially redesigned *Resident Evil 4* several times before he settled on the cocktail of action and horror that appears in the final game. Moving the camera closer to Leon pulls you into the on-screen action, while the ability to specifically shot out body parts makes managing the large crowd of enemies you face far tenser. Context-sensitive buttons allow Leon to pull off an impressive number of moves, from roundhousing enemies to kicking down ladders and stabbing the necks of giants, while the new inventory system kept the tedious item management of earlier games to a bare minimum.

Resident Evil 4's set pieces are still some of the best around, while its dynamic pacing, sheer variety and tense shepherding of Ashley (who Leon has been sent to rescue) make it stand apart from its many peers. It's arguably more action than horror, but it was just what the series and the genre needed. And it still managed to pull off a series of incredibly gruesome scenes, proving that while Mikami was content to take the series in an exciting new direction, he hadn't forgotten what had made it so popular in the first place. While HD versions of the game do exist, we'd argue that the enhanced Wii port is the definitive version to own.





RESIDENT EVIL: DEADLY SILENCE 2006

NINTENDO DS

Capcom celebrated *Resident Evil*'s 10th anniversary by remaking the game for Nintendo's dual-screened portable. In addition to including the original game it also features Rebirth mode, which introduces plenty of clever touch-based additions that greatly adds to the overall gameplay. Zombie slashing, CPR (by blowing into the mic) and shaking off enemies all adds to the atmosphere, while the smaller screen also enhances the creepy vibes of the classic game. Rebirth also includes a couple of mini-games for up to four players that adds further meat to what is essentially yet another remake of the PlayStation original.

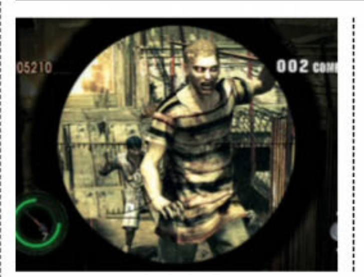
RESIDENT EVIL: THE UMBRELLA CHRONICLES 2007

WII

This was the logical evolution of the *Gun Survivor* series and it works incredibly well. *The Umbrella Chronicles* is a rather enjoyable on-rails shooter that focuses on the events found in the first three games and *Resident Evil Zero*. It's possible to look around the playing area with the Nunchuk, but you're effectively mowing down classic enemies as they continually assault you. There are a large number of levels to unlock and plenty of alternate routes, ensuring that *The Umbrella Chronicles* has plenty of replay value. A HD version for the PlayStation 3 was released in 2012.









RESIDENT EVIL 5 2009

VARIOUS

The first *Resident Evil* game for the then next-gen consoles was a long time coming and quite controversial, due to all the racism claims that surrounded it upon release. What's interesting about *Resident Evil 5* is that it's essentially two different games depending on how you play through it. Play on your own and Capcom's game becomes amazingly frustrating because newcomer Sheva is utterly useless as a supporting character. She constantly stumbles into trouble, easily gets herself surrounded by enemies and rarely gives you help when it's needed.

Play with a second player, however, and the game transforms dramatically. It lacks the well-structured pace of *4* of course, and the less said about the lousy cover system the better, but it otherwise becomes a lot of fun. There's something immensely satisfying about exploring the African setting with a friend, while the online version of *Mercenaries* is arguably the best version of the mini-game yet. There's a definite move towards all-out action compared to *4* – it's as action-packed as Chris's biceps are huge – and the final boss is a disappointment, but it's a solid addition to the series.

RESIDENT EVIL: THE DARKSIDE CHRONICLES 2009

WII

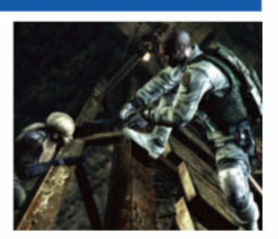
Capcom's second Wii shooter is business as usual, although it offers an improved story and enhanced visuals. It chooses to focus on *Resident Evil 2* and *Code: Veronica*, but it's more character-orientated than T*he Umbrella Chronicles*. A HD version was released on PS3 in 2012.





RESIDENT EVIL 5: GOLD EDITION 2010

VARIOUS



Capcom released several pieces of DLC for *Resident Evil 5*, including Versus, an online multiplayer mode, various costumes for Mercenaries and two standalone story-based adventures, Lost In Nightmares and Desperate Escape. *Gold Edition* combined all this together, while also including Mercenaries Reunion and PlayStation Move support for the PS3 version.

RESIDENT EVIL: THE MERCENARIES 3D 2011

NINTENDO 3DS

Don't buy a second-hand version as it's impossible to wipe saves. While the 3D isn't the best, *Mercenaries* proves to be a solid score attack game, even if it brings little new to previous Mercenaries games. Despite this it's a fun score attack game with plenty of memorable locations, a host of recognisable characters (although Leon S Kennedy is nowhere to be seen) and a small selection of brutally tough bosses. The maps are well designed while the graphics really show off the power of Nintendo's handheld system.







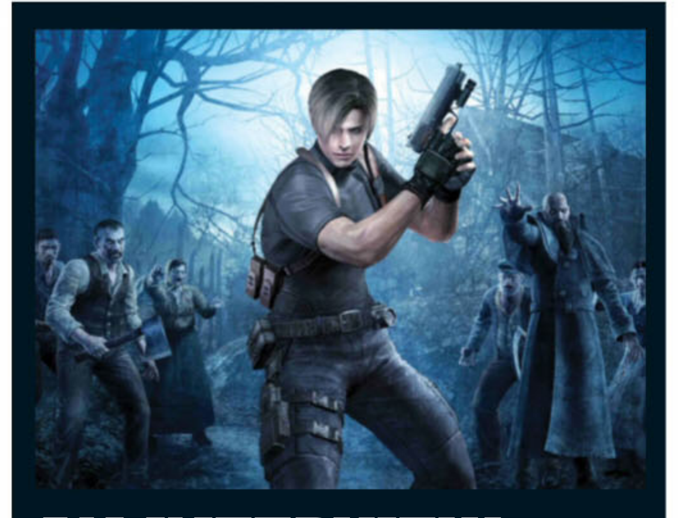
RESIDENT EVIL: REVELATIONS 2011

NINTENDO 3DS

Revelations was one of the first 3DS games to utilise the Circle Pad Pro add-on. While it makes a good attempt at recapturing the early horror of the PlayStation games, it feels quite budget in places, particularly when the player is continually facing the same few enemy skins.

Like the later *Resident Evil 6*, *Revelations*' main campaign is split between several groups of characters and takes in various locations, from a deserted ship in the Mediterranean to an airstrip in the mountains. It allows the player to move and shoot, but also introduces *Metroid Prime*-style scanning and the ability to switch between three weapons. The dodge move of earlier games returns, while StreetPass support is also included. *Revelations* also introduces "Raid Mode", an excellent new game mode that sees you battling through arranged versions of earlier scenarios.

A HD version was released in 2013 for PS3, Xbox 360, Wii U and PC. While it added various bits of new content, it also highlighted the budget-like roots of the 3DS original.



AN INTERVIEW WITH YOSHIAKI HIRABAYASHI

Capcom's producer looks back at the Resident Evil series

How many *Resident Evil* games have you been involved in now?

I've worked on five titles – *Resident Evil 4-6*, *Resident Evil Zero*, and the GameCube version of *Resident Evil*.

What is it that drew you to the series?

I studied computer graphics at college, and was invited by Capcom to try interviewing for a job there, so it was really something that I got into initially due to the situation at Capcom when I joined. That was the team I entered and I've been involved with the series ever since.

What do you find most satisfying about creating *Resident Evil* games?

Creating the games is such a long process. With that in mind, seeing players enjoy the games after they come out is the most satisfying and rewarding part of the job, and that goes for any game, not just *Resident Evil*.

Why do you think *Resident Evil* remains so popular?

I think that the games remain popular because they are enjoyable – not just as survival horror games, but also through the story, characters and other aspects.

What do you feel *Resident Evil HD* will bring to the series now?

I think it's a great chance for players to experience the original *Resident Evil* title, which is acclaimed by many as a masterpiece, in amazing HD quality.

Which of the Resident Evil series is your favourite game and why?

The GameCube version of *Resident Evil* – not just because it was my first project, but also because I think it was a very well-rounded game and a great survival horror title.

Who is your favourite *Resident Evil* character?

It's difficult to choose just one, but I would say Ada. Her mysterious presence in the stories adds a certain extra something to the *Resident Evil* series.

RESI ON THE SILVER SCREEN

Capcom's *Resident Evil* series is easily the most successful videogame licence to appear on the big screen. While the quality of the films ranges from okay to "god, my eyes, my eyes" they're all performed well at the box office. Paul W S Anderson has been involved in all five live-action films and is currently working on *Resident Evil: The Final Chapter*. Anderson's wife, Milla Jovovich is the star of all six films and plays Alice, a character created specifically for the films. Despite their critical disdain, the series has generated over $915 million. Capcom has also released three anime-based movies. The short film *Biohazard 4D-Executer* was released in 2000, *Resident Evil: Degeneration* focused on Leon S Kennedy and Claire Redfield and was released in 2008, while *Resident Evil Damnation* was released in 2012 and follows Leon and Ada Wong. The animated films are set in the same universe as the actual games.

RESIDENT EVIL: OPERATION RACCOON CITY 2012

VARIOUS

Conceptually, *Operation Raccoon City* is a great idea, expanding on the online mechanics first hinted at in *Outbreak*. Unfortunately, the game itself is something of a mess due to atrociously bad AI, glitch visuals and boring set pieces. Despite its overall shoddiness, gamers loved the idea of a *SOCOM*-styled squad-based shooter and it went on to sell over 2 million units.

RESIDENT EVIL 6 2012

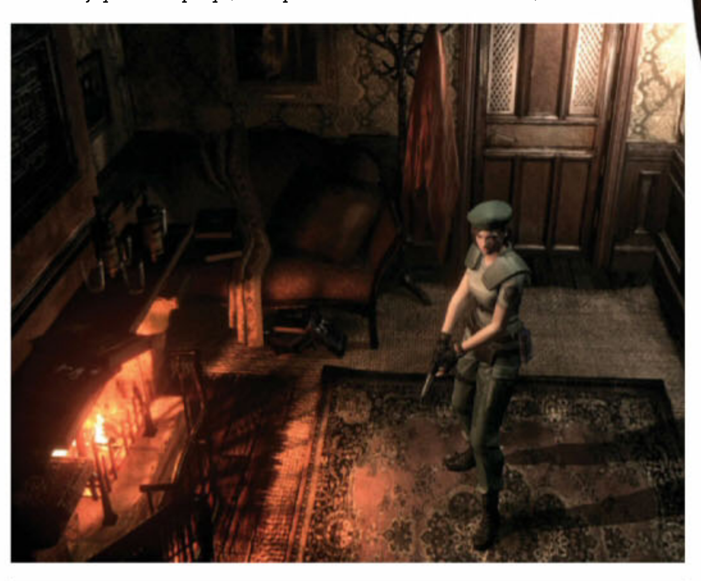
VARIOUS

Spread across four large scenarios and featuring an extremely lengthy campaign mode, *Resident Evil 6* is a bizarre, bloated triple-A game that tries far too hard. There are plenty of great action sequences to be found and the combat is arguably the best in the series, but there's way too much filler, which massively cuts down its enjoyment. Like *Resident Evil 5*, it works far better with a second player, as the computer AI is prone to hinder you as much as it helps. Each scenario is based around a specific character: Leon S Kennedy, Chris Redfield, Jake Muller and Ada Wong and varies greatly in its style and pacing, with Leon's being the most accurate to previous games. While the main game divided critics, it still managed to sell over 5 million copies, meaning it's only a matter of time before *Resident Evil 7* is officially announced.

RESIDENT EVIL HD 2015

VARIOUS

While it's essentially a HD update of the GameCube game, a number of new features make it worthy of inclusion here. The new widescreen mode does a great job of showing off the original's spectacular graphics, while the free movement, makes the game far more enjoyable to play (and quite a bit easier as a result).



"THERE ARE PLENTY OF GREAT ACTION SEQUENCES TO BE FOUND AND THE COMBAT IS ARGUABLY THE BEST IN THE SERIES"



RESIDENT EVIL: REVELATIONS 2 2015

VARIOUS

While *Revelations 2* is still under wraps we do know a few things about it. Barry Burton returns as a playable character, it will support co-operative gameplay and will be in episodic form, spread across four parts and introduces Barry's daughter, Moira. Here's hoping it can capture the atmosphere of the earlier games and not repeat the overblown pyrotechnics of *Resident Evil 6*.



MOBILE RESIDENT EVIL

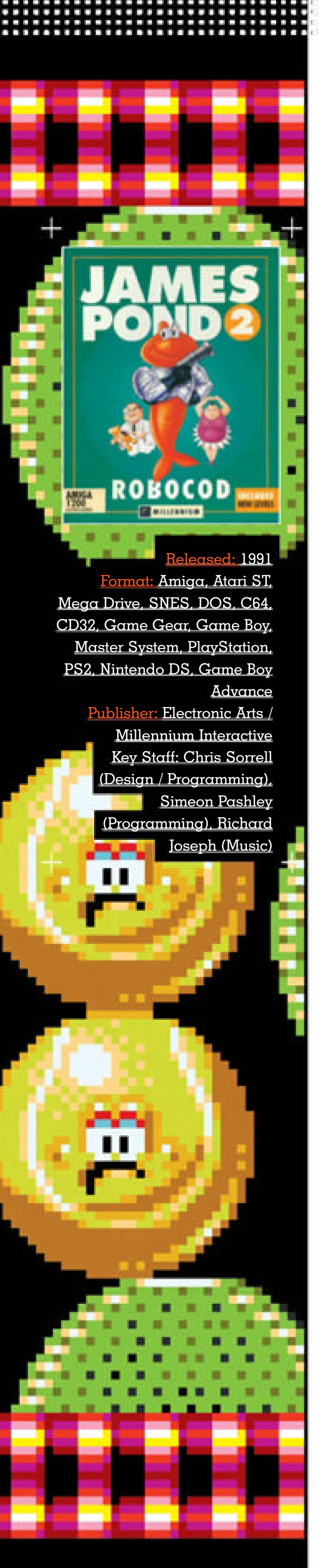
Capcom's franchise has appeared on various mobiles with varying degrees of success. First up was *Resident Evil: The Missions*, which was released in 2003. *Confidential Report* followed in 2005 and was a turn-based strategy game – a first for the series. *Genesis* was a puzzle game that appeared in 2008 and received a sequel, *Uprising*, a couple of years later. There have been social games in the form of 2011's *Outbreak Survive*, and shooters in the form of *Assault The Nightmare* and *Zombie Buster*. The most successful offerings have been on iOS however, and include cut-down versions of *Resident Evil 4* and *Mercenaries*. There's also *Degeneration* and *Afterlife*, which are based on their respective movies.



BEHIND THE SCENES

JAMES POND 2: ROBOCOD

We talk to the man behind one of 16-bit gaming's most enduring characters and find out if there's any future for this fishy superstar



Released: 1991
Format: Amiga, Atari ST, Mega Drive, SNES, DOS, C64, CD32, Game Gear, Game Boy, Master System, PlayStation, PS2, Nintendo DS, Game Boy Advance
Publisher: Electronic Arts / Millennium Interactive
Key Staff: Chris Sorrell (Design / Programming), Simeon Pashley (Programming), Richard Joseph (Music)

VIDEOGAMING'S OBSESSION with realistic visuals and blockbuster spectacle has sadly relegated the once-popular cartoon platformer to a relatively niche position in the market. Once upon a time, colourful mascots leaping around fantasy realms were the biggest draw in town, but these days only Mario and Sonic have endured long enough to fight the good fight – and the latter has arguably seen better days. These two franchises have survived against the odds and seen off all manner of competition – one of the most notable being an aquatic special agent who, in his second outing, decided to poke fun at one of Hollywood's most iconic law enforcement officer.

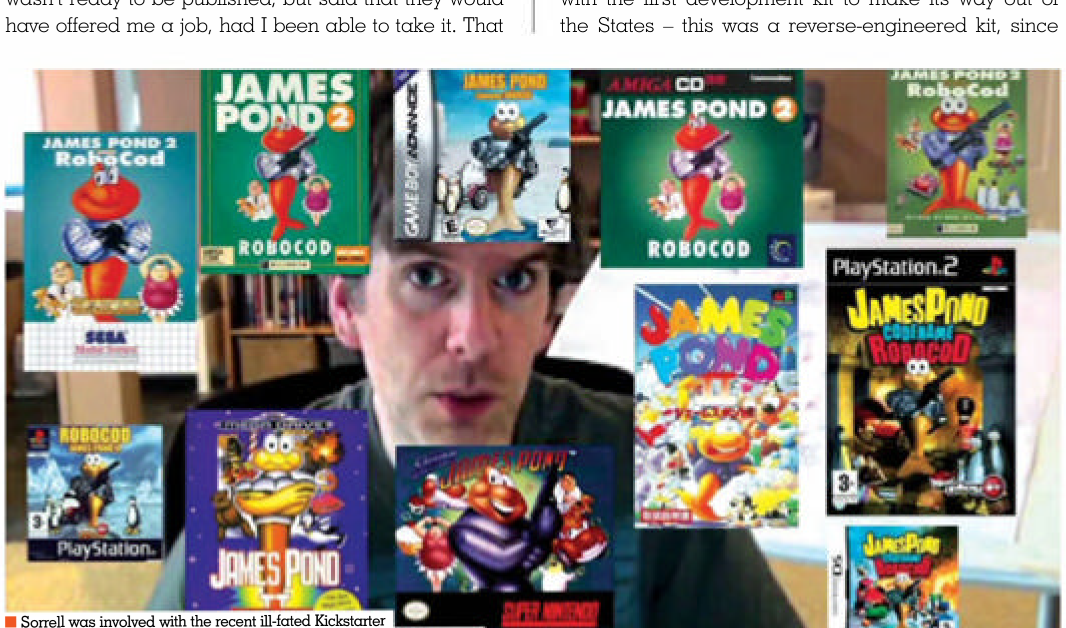
James Pond may no longer be a household name with gamers but back in the early Nineties he was a genuine rival to Sega and Nintendo's multimillion-selling characters. Pond was the brainchild of British designer Chris Sorrell, who, like so many of his contemporaries, cut his teeth during one of the most eclectic decades in living memory. "I grew up in the Eighties so my obsessions were fairly typical: *Star Wars* and videogames!" he says with a smile. "From the moment I played on my uncle's Atari VCS I just knew I wanted to make games. It wasn't until I was 11 and I finally convinced my parents to buy me a computer – for the educational benefits, of course – that I really started to play games and learned to program. First it was just BASIC – many hours spent typing in print-outs from magazines, only to see them crash and burn when run – and then assembly language as soon as I realised no-one actually made real games in BASIC!"

RoboCod's music was composed by Richard Joseph, who sadly passed away in 2007.

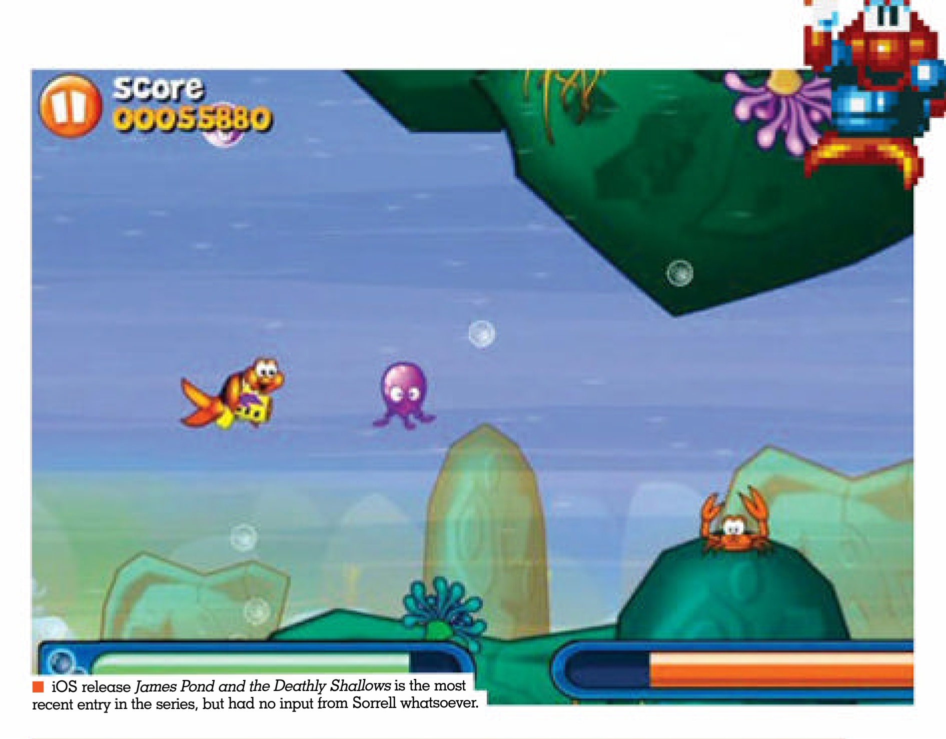
Determined to make his way into the industry, Sorrell had his father drive him to Gremlin Graphics' Sheffield offices to show them a shoot-'em-up he had created called *Repel*. "They quite reasonably concluded that it wasn't ready to be published, but said that they would have offered me a job, had I been able to take it. That sealed my resolve to leave school the moment I possibly could and start doing this thing for real." Sorrell didn't have to wait much longer for his big break, which came via a chance meeting during his weekend job at a local computer store. "Steve Bak was a well-respected independent programmer working on the Atari ST and Amiga," he explains. "He needed an artist to help him with a new project, a fighting game based on the *Spitting Image* TV show. Since graphics were a side interest for me, I spent a week putting together a bunch of sample images and was able to get the job." Steve went on to form Vectordean Ltd, and Sorrell came along for the ride. "Initially my role was purely as an artist, but after I 'proved' myself by converting Steve's old C64 game *Hercules* to the ST/Amiga as *Yolanda*, I was a programmer too. I finally got my first big opportunity: to design and code my own game."

That game would be *James Pond: Underwater Agent*, an adventure title which made a minor splash (pun absolutely intended) in 1990. "James Pond was loosely inspired – mechanically, at least – by one of my favourite C64 games, *Gribbly's Day Out*," Sorrell explains. "I wanted to come up with a cutesy central character that no-one had done before: a fish fitted the bill pretty well. He was initially just called 'Guppy' until one day publisher Millennium Interactive's MD Michael Hayward hit upon the awful but great pun that went on to define Pond's character."

James Pond reviewed well enough but wasn't a smash hit, despite US publisher Electronic Arts bringing it over to the recently-released Sega Mega Drive. "I guess they were looking for new Mega Drive titles, and a deal was cut whereby they would publish the game on Mega Drive provided we could complete it really quickly," recalls Sorrell. "That task was taken up primarily by Steve, who flew back from San Francisco with the first development kit to make its way out of the States – this was a reverse-engineered kit, since



Sorrell was involved with the recent ill-fated Kickstarter for a new *Pond* game, but now feels he was misled to gain his support.



■ iOS release *James Pond and the Deathly Shallows* is the most recent entry in the series, but had no input from Sorrell whatsoever.

OTHER CHOCOLATE BISCUIT BRANDS ARE AVAILABLE

■ ROBOCOD WAS UNIQUE for having a promotional tie-in with Penguin Biscuits, which was present in the home computer versions of the game. "We were nearing completion when out of the blue we had a request from Millennium to include some kind of McVitie's promotional content," explains Sorrell. "We certainly groaned loudly – both on the principle and because time was very limited – but this was clearly a worthwhile opportunity for Millennium that we were obliged to accommodate! As it turned out, McVitie's weren't averse to letting us have a little fun - hence the 'Smoked kipper for supper' line. I certainly couldn't have guessed that this initially unwelcome request could actually end up adding to the character of the game. You'd think we might have earned at least a lifetime's supply of Penguin bars, but to my knowledge Vectordean didn't get any money from the deal."



EA published games themselves rather than through Sega!" Sorrell had finally created his own title, but his circumstances were very much the same. "Development back then was super low budget and low tech," he reveals. "Vectordean's first office was Steve's spare bedroom, although by the time *Pond* began we had moved out into the upstairs office of a used car-lot! It was a pretty humble environment – really just one of those wooden portacabin things; roasting hot in summer, freezing cold in winter, and with the scent of touch-up paint and desperation all year round. *Pond* was created just using an Amiga and an Atari ST with an Action Replay cartridge for crude debugging." By the time Sorrell started work on the sequel, the tech had improved even if the environment had remained largely the same. "For *RoboCod* we invested in some 386 PCs and a proper cross development system which made things nicer."

Unlike *Underwater Agent, James Pond 2: Codename RoboCod* would be an out-and-out platformer, with a newly-suited hero who was capable of leaping over gaps, jumping on the heads of enemies and even extending his torso in order to reach high areas. Sorrell reveals that this shift towards what some would brand "Japanese" platform gaming was down to his introduction to the leading Sega and Nintendo titles of the period. "Prior to working on *RoboCod* I had never played on a Nintendo system," he says. "Of course I knew of *Mario*, but that was the extent of it. As we were finishing up *Underwater Agent*, Millennium's producer observed that having Pond climbing into pipes was – inadvertently – a very '*Mario*' thing. In the early stages of *RoboCod* my biggest influence was *Castle of Illusion*, starring Mickey Mouse – a game I loved to play on my import Mega Drive. Then, about halfway through production, I bought an import Super Famicom and played *Super Mario World*. Of course, I was blown away by it, and although the die was pretty much cast for *RoboCod*, this certainly became the quality benchmark I really wanted to hit." However, it might come as a surprise to learn that *Mario*'s rival didn't trigger a similar reaction in Sorrell. "*Sonic* was different," he admits. "I played it part-way through making *RoboCod* and frankly I didn't like it too much! Sure, I liked the speed – from which I slightly cribbed *RoboCod's* running fast leg-blur – but as a game it always felt very much a case of style over substance. With *James Pond 3* I tried to fuse the flair of *Sonic* with the depth of *Mario*, although that wasn't such an easy thing to do, and the game fell a little short."

The rise of consoles gave ports added importance, but Sorrell reveals that the Amiga version was the lead, and remains his personal favourite. "The Amiga

■ The SNES version of *RoboCod* was retitled *Super James Pond*.







One of the best platform games yet seen on the Mega Drive. Yes – even better than *Sonic* and *Mickey Mouse*!

Mean Machines #15

version of *RoboCod* was the most personal to me, and certainly was designed with that hardware in mind," he says. "The Mega Drive version benefits from a slightly smoother frame-rate, but due to that month less of development time, it's less polished. The Mega Drive version of *RoboCod* was handled in-house by a programmer named Simeon Pashley, who joined us after *Underwater Agent*. He was an excellent programmer and did an awesome job getting everything running smoothly, as well as helping out with programming of bosses and also the intro/outro screens. I provided over-the-phone assistance to the programmer of the SNES port – and created a new title screen image – but otherwise have had zero input on any version ever since. I would have dearly loved to have worked on the SNES – I was a massive fan of many SNES games, and their weird and wonderful 'Mode 7' effects – but that wasn't practical at the time. Unfortunately, while the SNES version had the potential to be the best of the three, it actually entailed quite a challenging re-write and ended up having big frame-rate issues and a few other compromised features."

Looking back now, it's amazing that Sorrell was so concerned with differences between versions and wasn't instead fretting about that moment when the legal team of film company Orion Pictures would come knocking on the door demanding that he cease infringing on its *RoboCop* copyright. "Honestly this was such a naive time – we never considered it for a second!" he says today. "At least we didn't to begin with. A short way into *RoboCod* development I believe Millennium took some legal flak over the MGM spoof title screen we had used on *Underwater Agent*! EA were clearly more savvy – at the last minute they made us remove the nice *RoboCod* logo I had drawn for the title screen; hence the game shipped with no logo, just the game's name weakly displayed in the regular game typeface. As far as I know there was never any direct contention from the *RoboCop* rights holders – I think Orion Pictures were busy going bankrupt at the time, which probably helped." Even so, there was one moment where things got a bit hairy – but it had nothing to do with android police officers from Detroit. "The one thing that did come up – and required a change in all versions of the game following the Mega Drive and Amiga originals – was to make one of my candy level enemies look less like Bertie Bassett," admits Sorrell. "It was a fair cop, as I may have slightly copied him!"

EA WERE CLEARLY MORE SAVVY – AT THE LAST MINUTE THEY MADE US REMOVE THE NICE ROBOCOD LOGO

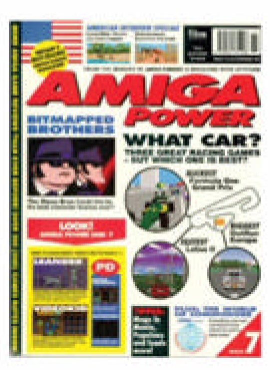
During *RoboCod*'s development Sorrell was lucky enough to work with the late, great Richard Joseph, who created the game's unique soundtrack. "I had somehow missed Richard's amazing earlier work, so I didn't initially realize how incredibly lucky we were to be working with him," he says. "He came in quite late during the development of *Underwater Agent* to provide music and effects, and within just a few days had sent us back the amazing *James Bond*-spoofing title track – skilfully adjusted to avoid legal challenges! He would drive up to visit us for the day, take a bunch of notes on what we could show him, and then a short while later a 3.5" disk would show up in

RADICAL CHANGES

■ SORRELL'S CAREER HAS taken him to some amazing places of employment – the pinnacle arguably being Radical Entertainment, developer of the PS3/360-based *Prototype* series: "Obviously the comparison between the Vectordean days and modern big-budget development couldn't be more stark. Radical was an awesome studio. I had just left a distinctly great Sony studio in the UK, but Radical's setup was something else: the top three floors of a shiny office building at the edge of downtown Vancouver, a giant neon logo on the front. They had an amazing kitchen/cafeteria with free food, arcade games, pool table, comfy chairs – even a large free-standing log-cabin meeting room within the kitchen space. It really was a buzzing, vibrant place, and packed with awesome, smart people from all over the world. At least it was until Activision took the reins a year later and on day one axed half of the studio. It was downhill from there." In 2012, downsizing triggered rumours that Radical had been closed entirely, but more recent reports suggest that it remains in business, but no longer produces original content and is instead used by owner Activision as a "support team". Even so, it's a sad end for one of Canada's most talented game makers.

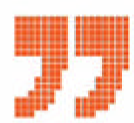






One of the best games we've ever seen. Good times guaranteed!

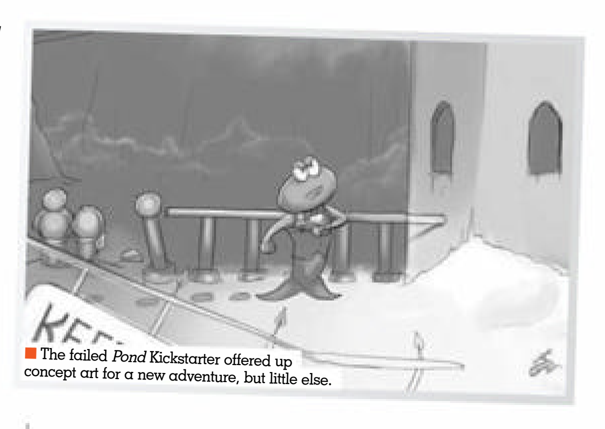
Amiga Power #7



the mail, packed with awesome. With *RoboCod* he literally worked wonders to fit music and sounds effects into the miserly amount of memory we had available. I suspect the strains of Richard's dangerously infectious music accompanied by *Pond*'s silly, boppy wait-dance animation are core to people's memories of the game."

On release, *RoboCod* was rightly hailed as a classic, with magazines of the period mentioning it in the same breath as genre classics like *Sonic* and *Mario*. For Sorrell, it was an incredible achievement, given his tender years. "I was still only 19, so seeing so many positive reviews and things like having the game played on Gamesmaster on TV certainly made me feel like I had arrived in the games scene that had been so important to me since I was a kid." Today, he is humbled that people still hold the title in high regard. "To have people still remembering and talking about an old game is a great honour and source of pride. That's especially true when people tell me about the strong place the game occupies in their childhood memories – whilst making me feel very old of course!"

So dearly remembered is *RoboCod* that Sorrell found himself embroiled in a crowdfunding campaign by *Pond* IP owner Gameware to create a new entry in the series – an event which garnered a considerable amount of attention. However, the campaign failed to meet its goal and has subsequently left Sorrell with a very bad taste in his mouth. "I was contacted by the people behind the campaign and asked if I wanted to be involved," he explains. "I initially refused, firstly because I somewhat dislike Kickstarter, and secondly because I greatly dislike trying to make games as cheaply as possible which modest Kickstarter budgets typically predicate. Against my better judgement they talked me around: 'It'll be a chance to make the game that fans really want', '…for fans to be involved', 'to make amends for those other shitty *Pond* games we did' (I may have paraphrased that last one). It started badly. Their surprise initial announcements made it totally look like this was my campaign rather than just something I was a small part of – not something I appreciated. It quickly became clear that I knew very little about the people running the campaign, and that their creative cupboards were bare – there was nothing that could sustain the campaign beyond what I might be able to contribute myself. And I had relatively little to offer because I was busy working on other things, and coming into this completely 'cold' having not given *Pond* a second thought for many years. I was glad they pulled the plug early rather than trying to limp to the finish line. I'm sorry we let people down, but I won't be doing this kind of thing again any time soon!"


■ The failed *Pond* Kickstarter offered up concept art for a new adventure, but little else.

ON RELEASE, ROBOCOD WAS RIGHTLY HAILED AS A CLASSIC

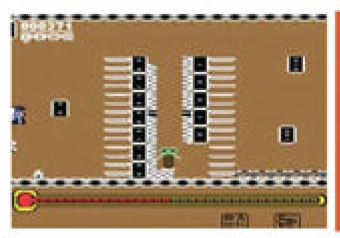
To confuse matters further, on the same day that the Kickstarter campaign was announced, veteran UK publisher System 3 revealed that it was updating *RoboCod* for a new generation of systems. Despite recent assurances from the company that the reboot is still in production, Sorrell isn't so sure anything will actually make it to market. "There was a weird announcement on the day that Gameware's Kickstarter campaign went live," he says. "That became the day I learnt of the acrimony between Gameware and System 3, and I realised that I had zero interest in being caught up in the bickering of businessmen looking to find the dollar signs in an almost 25-year-old franchise."

All of which means that a new *Pond* game with Sorrell at the helm is perhaps never going to be a

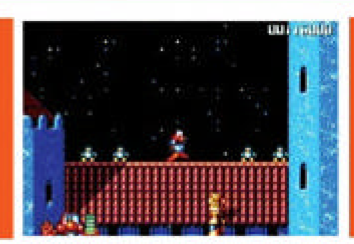


■ *RoboCod* has been ported to more recent formats too, such as the PlayStation 2 and Nintendo DS

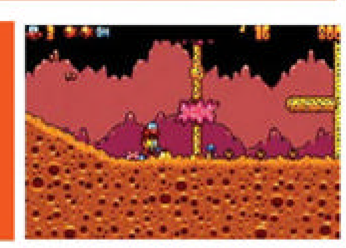
> GAMING EVOLUTION Thing On A Spring > JP2: RoboCod > JP3: Operation Starfish



C64 platformers were formative in the gaming life of Sorrell and *Thing On A Spring* has often been noted as the key game.



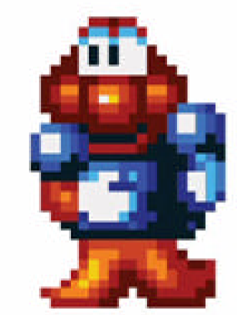
As *James Pond* looked to spoof the sci-fi serial world after *007* and *RoboCop*, *Operation Starfish* didn't quite work out.

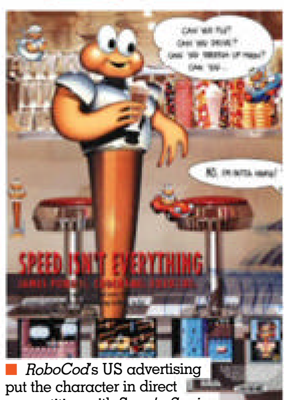


realistic proposition – at least not while the IP is in the hands of two different groups who don't seem to want to work together to bring it back to the table. It's a shame, because it's clear that the man who created the character is keen to resurrect him. "The *Pond* games were special to me because they were the first time I had the freedom to make the game I wanted to make," Sorrell says. "I think their highs – and lows – are things that are fairly personal to me. Seeing their legacy diminished with every cheap port to a new platform over the years has been frustrating, and seeing those 'new' *Pond* games even more so. Proud as I am or the originals, I fear the brand has now been sullied to a point where the magic is long gone; the only way I could ever work on another *Pond* game is if I had 100% control over its direction."

Post-*Pond*, Sorrell worked at Sony Studio Cambridge and Canadian company Radical Entertainment. Since leaving the latter, following its aggressive downsizing by owner Activision, Sorrell has been running his own indie studio, SpoonSized Entertainment, with his wife Katie, whom he met during his time at Vectordean and also works in the games industry. "I've been working on something fairly ambitious for a while now," he explains. "Initially I was aiming at iPad, but the insanity of market-place – plus my long-standing affinity for console-styled gameplay – is now pulling me in a different direction. So I've recently gone back to basics while keeping the stuff I really loved about the concept – things I've wanted to explore in a game since I was a kid, in fact. I'm now making it for PC – and hopefully consoles. Anyone interested can learn about the old version of the game at www.spoonsized.com. I'll be adding updates as the new version develops."

Although Sorrell has worked on titles like *MediEvil*, *Primal* and *Prototype*, *RoboCod* seems to be the game he will forever be most strongly linked with. Is he annoyed that his other ventures, arguably just as deserving of attention, are perhaps ignored in favour of the fishy secret agent? "Certainly not annoyed – stuff only becomes famous if it's good enough, and even then only if you're also very lucky," he admits. "Frustration is more the word. When you spend years working on something only to see it coming together as less than you know it should be, but time's running out, the ship's too big to turn – that's just the worst. I think this happens time and again in big budget development. *James Pond 3* suffered from this somewhat, my big PS2 project *Primal* even more so. Mostly with each project I try to learn from the experience and focus on what's next. I love now working independently, where you have the freedom to make mistakes and take the time needed to fix them rather than be forced to ship something you're not happy with."





RoboCod's US advertising put the character in direct competition with Sega's *Sonic*.



James Pond 3: Operation Starfish tried to out-*Mario* *Super Mario World*, and wasn't as warmly received as *RoboCod*.







RETRO INTERVIEW

SPEED RACER

As the designer and creator of WipEout, Nick Burcombe made it cool for grownups to play games. He tells us how it was done and explains his love for racing games

As Nick Burcombe himself will tell you, something special came together when *WipEout* was released on PS1 in September 1995. It was a perfect storm of the right game with the right attitude on the right console and it helped set the tone for years of titles to come. As it approaches its 20th anniversary this year, original designer and originator of the *WipEout* concept Nick Burcombe walks games™ through early concepts for the game, bringing in The Designers Republic, artists like Orbital and how it went on to influence gaming for years to come



WipEout's high-speed action was revelatory when it launched on the PS1.

How did you get started at Psygnosis?

It started for me, really, when back in 1985, my dad had a printing firm at the time and was doing listing paper and all that kind of stuff. He started coming home with all sorts of strange cromalins, packaging shots and all the rest of it. He got a deal with a videogames company that was just starting up. I think the very first box I saw was one for *Brataccas*. That's kind of going way back; that's the first title Psygnosis did. I think over those first couple of years, I got a chance to go into the office on work experience, at about 15, 16 years old.

I started just testing games, so that's really how I started getting known to the company. Obviously, I played games way before that. My first console was an Atari 2600. I basically went in on summer school holidays, and started testing games like *Terrorpods*; I think I brought home a copy of *Deep Space* and started playing that. This is one of Psygnosis' very, very early titles. So I kind of knew the business, I knew the company, and eventually I got a chance to be called a permanent tester. So that's really how it happened, just the fact that all these glossy boxes Psygnosis was known for were printed by my dad's company. That was my foot through the door. [laughs] It was a different industry in those days, much smaller. I think I was the first tester, I think I was employee number 12 on the payroll. It was very small at the time. That was 21 June 1989, so I just celebrated my 25 years there in 2014.

KEEPING IT SIMPLE MADE IT QUITE EASY FOR PEOPLE TO FOCUS ON WHAT WE WERE MAKING

How did you actually get to the point of leading up *WipEout*'s design?

Well, I mean, I'd been a tester – there was me and Chris Stanley; we were the testing department, and obviously we interacted with a lot of developers, most of them external. I wasn't really doing much with the internal guys at the time. I knew them all, we all socialised together and everything. But I'd done a little bit of design work with things like *Infestation* with a friend of mine, Danny Gallagher,



BLOCK-ROCKING BEATS

"■■■ I WOULDN'T WANT to see how *WipEout* came with like a rock track on it, or some other kind of pop. It's part of the DNA, isn't it? You got techno, you got graphic designs, you got very fast visuals, you got exciting physics and racing mechanics going on. It's a perfect blend of that sort of adrenaline rush, really. And that's the thing. Even [the marketing department], watching over our shoulders, because they weren't playing it, but they were looking over our shoulders, going, "I'm seeing what you're getting at, and I understand why it works on an audio-visual level as well." And I think that's part of its DNA, yeah."



Psygnosis hit upon a perfect mix of graphic design, futuristic settings and thumping soundtrack. *WipEout* was the coolest game around.

and I'd done sort of advisory roles. I think at the time my title had changed from games tester and tea boy to 'gameplay coordinator'. And I don't think I resolved that myself either, but they knew what role they wanted from me: they wanted somebody who concentrated on user experience.

The next break really came through when they asked me to do the boss designs for Microcosm. Now obviously, Microcosm being a movie player, effectively, was a tall order. That had its own challenges, with not a very flexible system, but that was my first sort of actual hands-on design work. After that we went on and did *Scavenger 4*. Again, that was still using the same CD-ROM movie-playback technology, and that was frustrating. I mean, it did alright, one American magazine gave it shoot-'em-up of the year. They were basing it off graphics. We did what we could. And then the sort of legendary story of me and Jimmy [Bowers] sat in the pub, and had just been finishing off *Mario Kart* on the SNES at the time. And I'd had that moment where I turned all the music off in the game and actually cranked up some techno, or whatever. And I'd finally beaten it after trying this 150cc cup over and over and over. I'd finally beaten it. It was just a very exciting moment, when I'd wanted to capture a kind of visceral thrill and pour it into something Jimmy was already working on. Now, he had already done the ships and already done early preliminary work on it. It didn't have a name at the time. I think the ship design originally came from *Matrix Marauders*, which was a dreadful, Amiga game.

Burcombe's latest, *Tabletop Racing*, has proved a great success on mobile platforms.

We started coming up with this whole game idea of this ultra fast combat racer. And that's really how it got started. It started pulling itself together. Everybody kind of got it after Jimmy had done his first render of two ships racing down a gully track – we had put Prodigy music over it and everybody just went "Wow, yeah, we need to make this game." This looked exciting.

The Designers Republic came along, and then the music came through, and marketing were very excited about what we were doing. It was one of those things where marketing was absolutely in tune with what we were doing, and when they were, "Oh, let's get it into the clubs", everybody was just on the same page. When it happens like that, it's quite rare, but when it happens like that everything just flows beautifully.

I mean, it was a lot of hard work getting it out, but it was a very rewarding time and, with Sony's money backing us as well, there was a lot of push on there. We had the resources to do what we wanted to do. So *WipEout* was born.

SETTING THE TONE

MANY PEOPLE SAID this, "Look, *WipEout* made gaming cool. It made it okay to become an adult and enjoy playing games, because they were now made for adults." Now, whether you would signify a fundamental shift onto *WipEout* , I don't know. I just consider them all very serendipitous. It all happened at the same time, but actually it did engage with an audience that would typically, based on the previous generations, would have started falling out of that category of 'gamer'. But I think the PlayStation brand just became the coolest brand in gaming overnight, and *WipEout* was a part of that, rode that roller-coaster, for sure. It wasn't weird hedgehogs and it wasn't Italian plumbers. It was something different. I think it was great to be a part of that.

It sounds like a lot of the concept was there right from the off, that it didn't need to change that much. Does that sound about right?

Yeah, I think Jimmy had ideas of dogfighting and you know, we both like military aircraft and other stuff, and I think that's what came through in the very first promo video, making it a combat racing game, taking out all the fuss and all the stuff that wasn't needed from the experiments in the Hackers videos.



The final version of *WipEout* wasn't as polished as it could have been, but it set out the rules for the series to build on.

Whittling it down and saying, "look, this is it, this is the game design. These are the teams, this is the character. It was a sort of organic conversation, but I think the first conversation was in the Oxlade Arms, a pub over on the Wirral. I knew in my head what I wanted it to be, based on Jimmy's renders and what the imagery had been. It instantly clicked for me. "I know how to do this, and I know what we're gonna make with it." Instantly. Jimmy was just so excited by me being so excited, more than anything. He was like, he was one of my biggest advocates, and really supported me to take the actual design role, and they basically gave me free rein. I wrote the game design document, I think it was a seven-page document, that's all, a very simple document. Actually, keeping it simple made it quite easy for people to focus on what we were making.

We had all the weapons listed out, the handling characteristics with a nice little chart. I look back at it as a document now and it's very naive, but actually, it was enough for everybody to have one, clear direction. Quite often, when you get the technology moving first, it can go sprawling, and then [you] whittle it down afterward. But I think everybody knew I had it in my head what the game should be. And it was measured, focused. It could be done with a reasonably small team. I think there were 12 or 15 of us at the time, and it was done on a very short budget, and a very short notice as well, knowing the European launch of the PS1 was coming up very soon.

What were your expectations for *WipEout*?

I mean, we… I had no idea that it would still be being made almost 18 years later. You never know that when you start out on a project like that. Our expectations were: "Wouldn't it be great to be part of the PlayStation launch?" I know when, I think it was Ken Kutaragi that came to visit, to see where we were up to, when we were four months from launch. And he said: "It's very nice, but you'll never make it."

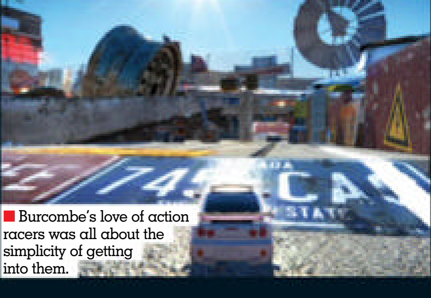
Of course, everybody then worked their bollocks off until it was done, and we were there for the launch. Well, the European launch, anyway. I think knowing that we'd poured our heart and soul into it, that's what people feel. It's a game that has its own soul and I think reflects perfectly what the team were doing and thinking at the time. It's nice to engage with the team in that way, I think.

IT'S A GAME THAT HAS ITS OWN SOUL AND I THINK REFLECTS PERFECTLY WHAT THE TEAM WERE DOING AND THINKING AT THE TIME

But you know, we were still in Manchester on launch night of the PS1. I mean, there were like six or seven titles coming out, but people were queuing up to buy *WipEout* and *Ridge Racer* and *[Battle Arena] Toshinden.* These were the three titles that virtually everyone we spoke to in the queue were waiting to buy, which is very exciting. It's great to be a part of it, and we had no idea at the time that it would go from strength to strength, and still be being made nearly two decades later. You can't forecast these things. You put your heart and soul into it and if it works, it works, you know.



WipEout has gone on to become a mainstay of the PlayStation-exclusive roster, although it's been a little while since *WipEout HD.*



Burcombe's love of action racers was all about the simplicity of getting into them.

When we got to *WipEout 2,* I think we did start to have expectations, because we knew we'd made an impact, we'd helped with the PlayStation launch. We also knew what was wrong with the game and we wanted to fix it. We had more people on the team, and that whole game, *WipEout 2097,* is still regarded as one of the better ones, and that was probably done in about eight months, nine months, something like that, which is an incredibly short time frame when you look at it. Because again, everybody knew what they wanted to fix, everybody knew what they wanted to do with it. Everyone wanted to take The Designers Republic to the next level, they wanted to take the music to the next level. It was done quickly and passionately, and it worked brilliantly. I still think it's one of the best ones, for sure.

You keep coming back to racing games. What is it about that particular genre that attracts you so much?

I *love* racing games. I've always loved racing games. I remember sitting there, as a kid, on my BBC Micro B, trying to do my first clean lap on *Revs.* You know, the Geoff Crammond one, the Formula [Three] game. And you know, the sense of achievement, that's how hard games were in those days, you couldn't even do a lap fully in maybe three months. Finally cracking it, and getting it, understanding it, was just fantastic. I've always enjoyed racing games. I love cars, I always watch Formula One, it's always been something I've enjoyed.

I think, when I had my moment with *Mario* and understood the weapons, I saw the extra layer of strategy and depth of gameplay to it. With combat racing games, I could pick [a racer], have a blast, have a great time, and I don't have to invest 40, 50 hours to do that. I can just get in there, have a good time, enjoy it. We know it's not the biggest genre, we're not an FPS, or anything like that, I just love making them, refining them, trying to make them better each time, and that's where we're heading with *Tabletop Racing.*

GAME CHANGERS

GUITAR HERO

Released: 8 November 2005 (NA) **Publisher:** RedOctane **Developer:** Harmonix **System:** PlayStation 2



Jimi Hendrix's *Spanish Castle Magic* had the vocals removed because the lawyers of his estate blocked the possibility of an impersonator performing the song instead.

The game that cemented the real-time strategy game as a permanent fixture in gaming, we travel back to the birth of Westwood's award-winning franchise to examine the solid foundations the studio built its success upon

UNLESS YOU WERE into DDR or arcade-based competitive games, the rhythm-action genre was all but dead in the mid-2000s. That area of gaming hadn't seen anything fresh since the late Nineties, it was fading into obscurity, and it was fading fast. In the summer of 2005, however, a small publisher called RedOctane released a game that would not only change the rhythm-action game forever, but also impact the entire world's music culture. That game was *Guitar Hero*.

Guitar Hero wasn't an accident – it was the very intentional result of Harmonix targeting a seemingly niche market. The developer was already au fait with the rhythm action genre (thanks to *Amplitude* and *Frequency*), and *Guitar Hero* was born out of the studio learning its lessons from how people responded to its past projects. Harmonix and RedOctane looked across to Japan, where the Konami-published *Guitar Freaks* had been ticking over successfully since 1998, and decided that, between them, they could smash open a similarly shaped hole in the Western market.

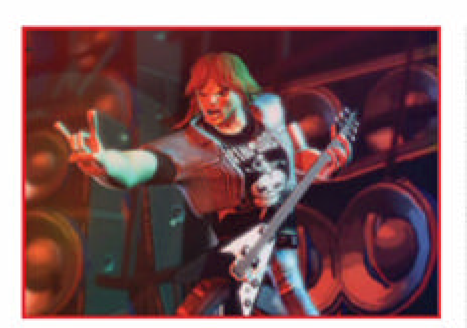
Harmonix knew the abstract visuals its former games carried turned people off, and it knew the algorithms that powered the difficulties and gem tracks in the game needed to be more 'casual friendly'. This lead to Harmonix scrapping the initial '*Pong*-like' visuals the game carried in favour of something more aesthetically relevant.

The result was a game with universal appeal, and a difficulty curve that worked for gaming newcomers and score-attacking masochists alike. Between the gimmick of having a new way to interact with your console, and the electrical motifs, rock-inspired art direction and in-your-face anarchism the game encapsulated, *Guitar Hero* broke into the mainstream consciousness, and did so in style.

Consequentially, *Guitar Hero* made the gaming peripheral cool again – the little plastic guitar that

THE ANATOMY OF GUITAR HERO

WE ALL KNOW THE HEIGHTS GUITAR HERO ROSE TO AFTER ITS LAUNCH, BUT WHAT WERE THE KEY INSPIRATIONS THAT LEAD TO ITS CREATION?



MICROSOFT

★ Microsoft's ex vice-president of games publishing, Ed Fries, told Harmonix that 'no rhythm-action game could succeed without custom hardware' when the studio pitched Frequency… feedback the developer clearly took to heart when it came to creating *Guitar Hero* and its equipment.



GUITAR FREAKS

★ *Guitar Freaks* had been around since 1998 – a popular arcade game in Japan – and its local success prompted RedOctane to approach Harmonix when the publisher learnt that the developer was trying to pitch a peripheral-based game to other companies – cue *Guitar Hero*.



GIBSON SG

★ One of the most iconic guitars ever distributed among the musical world received a refreshing breath of fresh publicity thanks to *Guitar Hero*, and the guitar is now as synonymous with Harmonix's series as it was with the new wave of British heavy metal.

shipped with the game, by all rights, should have bombed: it looked like something that would line the shelves of Toys 'R' Us, a Fisher Price-esque Gibson SG that featured colour-coded buttons instead of a fretboard, and a click bar instead of strings. It infantilised the guitar, yet captured the imaginations of gamers across the world. It turned the definition of what a 'pad' was on its head, and for a while, was the most trendy accessory to decorate any gamers' abode (fast-forward four years and a lot of gamers would have an entire faux-band setup erected precariously in their living rooms…)

■■■ The game sold over 1.5 million copies in its first year on sale, establishing the roots of a series that would later go on to gross over $1 billion US dollars, spreading its influence over two console generations, seven standalone expansions, handheld versions and a mobile tie-in. *Guitar Hero* was reported by the likes of *Wired*, CNN, the BBC, *The Guardian* and more as 'one of the most important cultural phenomena of the 21st centaury'. That's because *Guitar Hero* didn't just open up the peripheral market to publishers, who *jumped* at the chance to extract as much profit as they could from what could cynically be perceived as gaming's newest 'fad', it also had a notable impact on the music industry.

The 47 playable tracks in the first *Guitar Hero* saw sales increase between 136% and 400% after being featured in the game. By 2007, *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* combined had earned more money than the entire digital music industry… In fact, the games had earned over £100 million more. By 2008, the music game industry accounted for 16% of *all software sold* in the financial year, acquiring a value of £1.9 billion.

Over half of the under-18 gaming audience in the UK had played a music action game by *Guitar Hero III*'s release (according to charity Youth Music) and it can be assumed, therefore, that *Guitar Hero* had a greater impact on the musical taste of post-millennial kids than even mainstream radio. *Guitar Hero* changed the way we bought, digested and discovered music.

It also brought social gaming to the masses – while the impact of Nintendo's Wii can't be overlooked when considering how the casual market exploded in the mid-2000s, *Guitar Hero* is also notable for how it brought co-operative and competitive gaming into the living room. There had been nothing like *Guitar Hero* before, and arguably, there hasn't been since. The game caught the imagination of the casual and hardcore gamer alike, fitting perfectly into the Venn diagram of everyone's secret desire: to become some kind of a rock god.

GUITAR HERO HAD A GREATER IMPACT ON THE MUSICAL TASTE OF POST-MILLENNIAL KIDS THAN EVEN MAINSTREAM RADIO

KEY FACTS

- After visiting the studio two weeks before the game released, Zakk Wylde insisted the Harmonix crew put two of his songs into the game – and it did!
- 30 of the game's songs are actually covers – performed by WaveGroup Sound with help from Drist's lead guitarist Marcus Henderson
- Harmonix tracked the same model of fan Ozzy Osbourne used to modify his voice in *Iron Man* on CraigsList to replicate the sound of Black Sabbath's seminal hit authentically

GAME CHANGERS

THE 10 MOST GIMMICKY PERIPHERALS

GUITAR HERO MADE THE PERIPHERAL VALID, BUT IT'S IN BAD COMPANY: THIS AREA IN GAMING IS A PILE OF SECRETS, WITH PUBLISHERS PUSHING PRODUCTS IN PROFITEERING EFFORTS. HERE ARE OUR FAVOURITE EXAMPLES OF TERRIBLE PERIPHERALS…



SEGA ACTIVATOR

■ THE SEGA ACTIVATOR – aside from being ridiculously badly named – was a device that plugged into the MegaDrive and formed a ring you stood in. It then shot infrared beams upwards, supposedly tracking your flailing arms and tracking them as inputs for the game you were playing… it ultimately failed. Because it was awful.



KONAMI LASERSCOPE

■ IF YOU EVER WANTED to look like a budget Transformer while playing on the NES, you had the option of buying and equipping the Konami LaserScope – and headset that featured voice controls and a lightgun, all in one (un)fashionable piece. It wasn't very good – shouting 'fire' often never worked – and the NES Zapper did everything better.



GAMETRAK

■ THE PS2 PERIPHERAL was a motion control system that attached to your wrists with retractable cords, measuring your movements by how far the cords were pulled. It was one of the best-selling PS2 peripherals, but was unfortunately limited to only a golf game and the awful beat-'em-up, *Dark Wind*.



MATTEL POWER GLOVE

■ THE PERIPHERAL THAT'S inspired a thousand parodies, the Power Glove was an imprecise, frustrating piece of tat that was marketed at NES owners as if it were some kind of futuristic necessity. It had the potential to be so good – it even looked a *little* bit cool – but alas, it was just bad tech.



REALITY QUEST GLOVE

■ ON THE SUBJECT of gloves, it wasn't just the NES that had the pleasure of its own hand-based peripheral: the PSone was also blessed with the Reality Quest Glove. The Nineties-looking thing was more of a slipshod plaster cast than a piece of hardware. It felt plastic and cheap and the connections often broke.



TONY HAWK: RIDE

■ IF YOU'VE EVER set foot on a real skateboard, you'll instantly recognise that Tony Hawk: Ride is a complete disservice to how skating works. The game that the heavy, cumbersome skateboard was released for was also incredibly rushed – apparently because the studio behind it spent so much time on the hardware. Oops.



BUZZ

■ BUZZ WAS LIKE setting up a budget quiz show in your own room – complete with obnoxious and over-zealous host, the game was shipped with a set of four red buzzers that were to be hit whenever you were ready to answer a question. Unfortunately, there was often lag, and three people pressing the buzzer at once would crash the game.



SEGA BASS FISHING ROD

■ THE DREAMCAST HAD a range of forward-thinking but ultimately useless peripherals. The Sega Bass Fishing Rod was a pretty underwhelming experience when used as a virtual fishing tool, but when it was used in a cheeky game of *Soul Calibur*… that was when the odd, dwarf of a fishing rod really came into its own. Not so much for the fishing, though.



RESIDENT EVIL CHAINSAW

■ WHEN *RESIDENT EVIL 4* was released, Capcom thought it would be a *wonderful* idea to release a plastic chainsaw peripheral as an extension to the package… unfortunately, if you plugged in the controller and equipped it in-game, you couldn't do anything – the controller wouldn't track your movement *or* register any hits on enemies.



DJ HERO DECKS

■ FOLLOWING ON FROM *Guitar Hero*'s runaway success, Activision thought it would be a lucrative idea to target the other side of the music market – in the electronic and dance scene. The game was considered a flop at first – with the peripheral largely blamed – but the games *still* make Activision money, so the decks weren't a total failure.

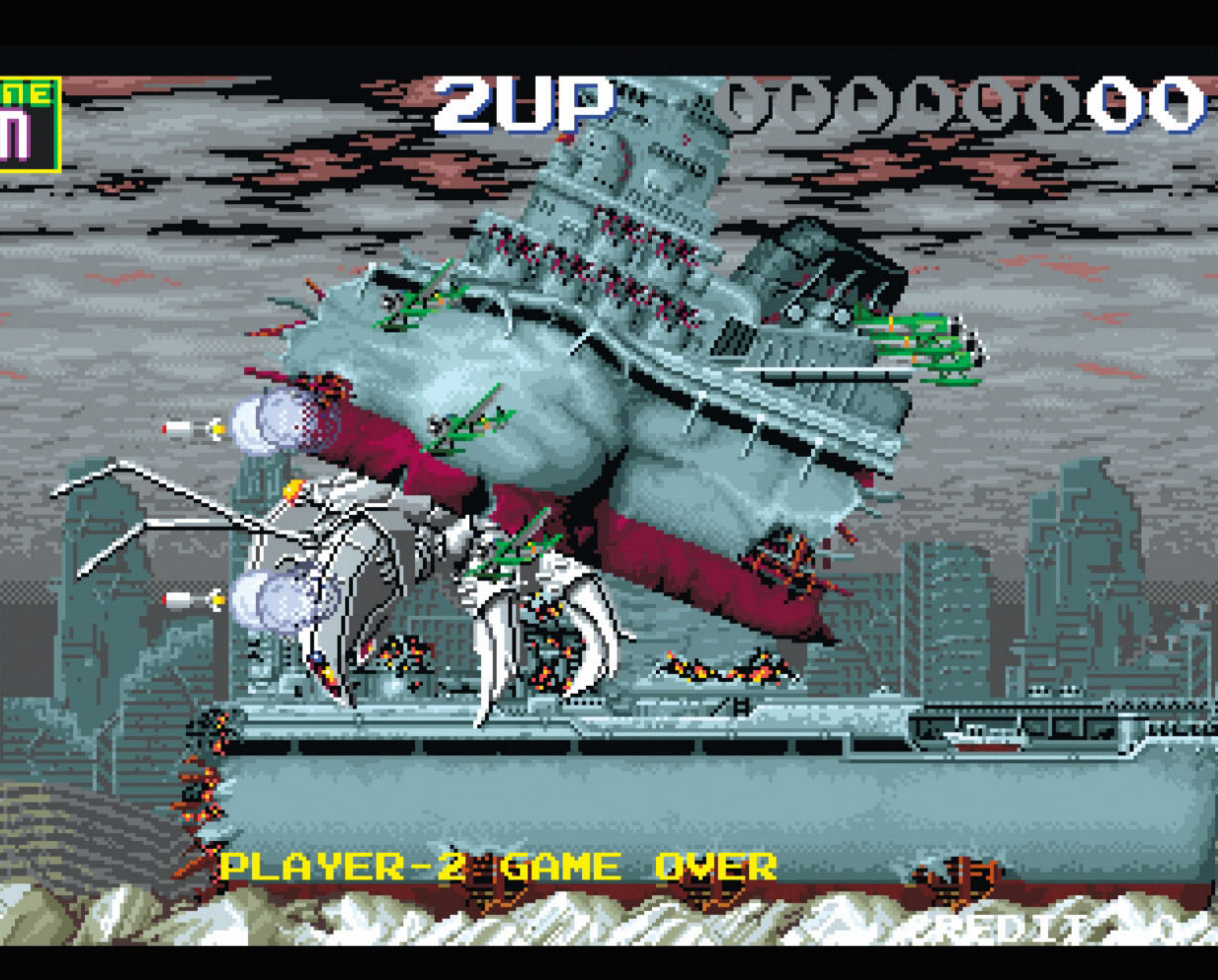


BEST BOSS

DARIUS 2 ARCADE

ARCADE **1988**

■ We found it hard to choose a boss amongst the fantastic array of mechanical sea life that makes up *Darius*' rogues gallery, but eventually we settled on this motorised crustacean: Yamato. The hermit crab actually ripped apart a Japanese battleship and crawled into it, perhaps justifying some of the boss's crazy firepower. Darius is well known for its ridiculous boss fights, but this one was trickier than most – the enemy didn't alter its colour as it took damage, making it all the more difficult to gauge how close you were to finishing it off. Yamato made another appearance – once again as a boss – in developer Taito's other famous series, *Bubble Bobble 2* (though it was a lot less imposing there).


2UP
PLAYER-2 GAME OVER

ESSENTIALS

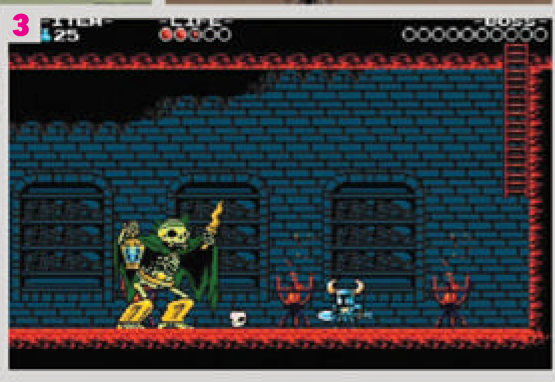
10 MODERN PIXEL ART MASTERS

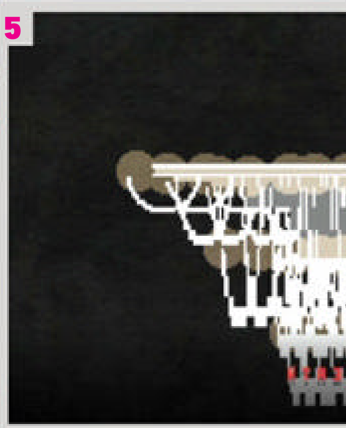
■ In the days of 8/16-bit games, developers had little choice but to render their creative output in 2D pixel-art. As the 32-bit generation began, waves of polygon-heavy 3D games saturated the market, but recently we've seen a resurgence in pixel games – and in just about every genre, too. We're huge fans of the art style here at **games**™, so we put together the best pixel games to hit the market in recent years…


1


4


2


3


5

Papers, Please (2013)
Genre: Immigration Services Simulator

1 *Papers, Please* is set in the immigration/border control offices of the fictional Eastern Bloc state of Arstotzka, after being selected for the position by random employment ballot. The Communist theme is established from the off, and the game puts you in moral situations other games refuse to – therein lies its strength. It's tricky, engrossing and offers political commentary you won't find in a lot of other games, and the art style that makes it up is intentionally coloured with drab earthy tones – contrasting nicely against the vibrant colours you tend to see in pixel games. It's as interesting as it is unique.

Rogue Legacy (2013)
Genre: Rogue-'lite'

2 *Rogue Legacy* took 18 months to develop, but it'll take you far, *far* longer to complete – with a difficulty level inspired by the *Souls* series of games, the game also uses the 2D action platforming you'll find in *Spelunky,* used to navigate a sadistic, randomly-generated dungeon. It's frustrating as all hell when you first boot it up, but as you learn the intricacies and the pixel-perfect commands, it opens up (although it's still unreasonably hard). The boss sprites you encounter all have 'remixed' versions with varying attack patterns scattered throughout the game – a bonus way of reusing content unique to pixel-art games.

Shovel Knight (2014)
Genre: Nostalgia-Inducing Platformer

3 Intentionally designed like the 8-bit games of old, *Shovel Knight* takes its inspiration heavily from *Castlevania, DuckTales, Super Mario Brothers* and *Mega Man* – going as far as using the same colour palette as the games you'd see on the NES. A side-scrolling adventure, supported with a chip-tune soundtrack (two tracks of which were written by *Mega Man* composer Manami Matsumae), *Shovel Knight* has many entertaining nods to its forebears – you can even ride your eponymous shovel like a pogo stick, a la *DuckTales.* It's the best kind of nostalgia: fresh and new with nods to the games that lead to its existence.

Mercenary Kings (2014)
Genre: Shoot-'em-up

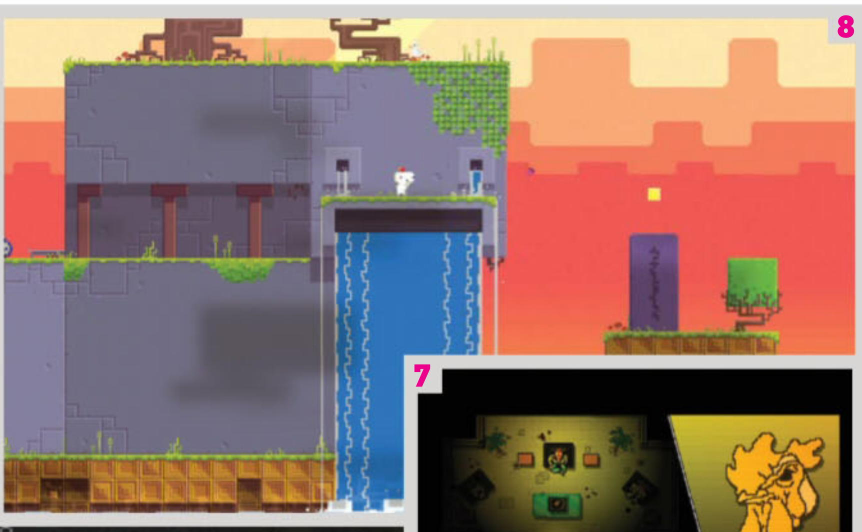
4 Think *Metal Slug,* but a much more fluid experience, and with gorgeous animations, and you'll have a good idea of what you can expect from *Mercenary Kings.* The game's single-player campaign leaves a lot to be desired, but like *Metal Slug,* the real fun comes in when you grab some friends (three in this case) and blaze your way through the levels as a four-strong unit. It's in this aspect of the game that the tight shooting mechanics and light platforming really come into their own, and the chunky, well-oiled animations glue everything together beautifully. The campaign may be long, but at least it looks beautiful.

Nidhogg (2010)
Genre: Tactical Fencing

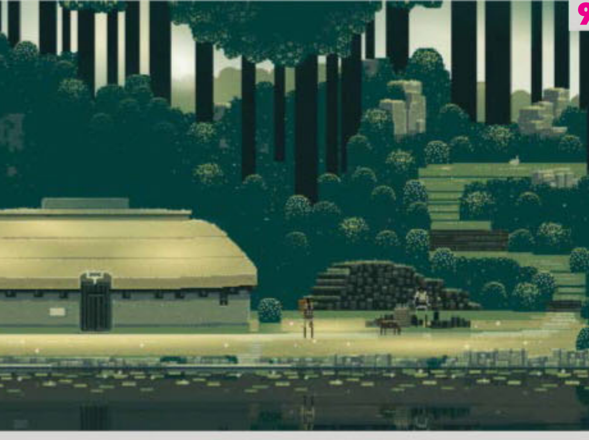
5 There are few games out there that really excel at mimicking the feel of a *proper* duel – but *Nidhogg,* despite its minimalism in terms of graphics, pulls it off with aplomb. The 2D arenas that make up the game's levels are designed for one-on-one combat, and the way the game is balanced makes it easy for newcomers and pros alike to clash with interesting results. The Eighties aesthetic – mixed with a vivid palette of rushing colour – makes every encounter feel unique, and every death feel epic. For how incredibly simple it appears, *Nidhogg* is actually phenomenally well-balanced – one of the best indie fighters we've played.



8



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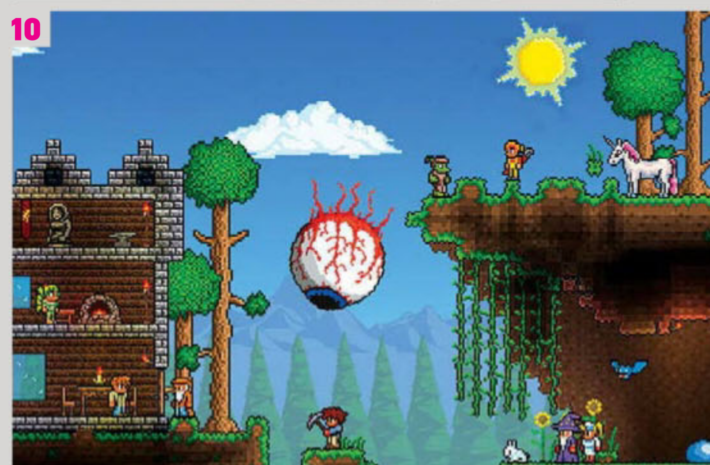


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Super Meat Boy (2010)
Genre: Sadistic Platformer

6 We can't stop writing about *Super Meat Boy* – it tends to make it into one of these lists once every couple of months. But Team Meat's pixel-perfect platformer is more than the sum of its parts: the mechanics are satisfyingly brutal, the art direction features some of the best pixel-based gore we've ever seen and the soundtrack is like someone got Sonic Team and made them into a metal band. Riddled with unlockable characters, hidden levels, secret items and cruel 'Dark Worlds', it's just as playable after 60 hours as it is after six. Essential for any hardcore gamer. Seriously, if you've not played it yet, get on it.

Hotline Miami (2012)
Genre: Twin-Stick Massacre Action

7 Dennaton Games' top-down shooter is surprisingly one of the most violent games we've ever played – made worse by the pseudo-realistic way it handles and the unforgiving nature of the multiple encounters you'll play through. It's basically *Drive: The Game*, even referencing director Nicolas Winding Refn in the credits, littering the game with subtle hints to 2011's neo-noir hit. It's the pixel-art equivalent of a David Lynch story – so say the creators themselves – and uses the top-down view as a smart device to distance the player from the violence: a theme that's echoed implicitly in the game's deceptive story.

Fez (2012)
Genre: Trans-Dimensional Puzzle Platformer

8 *Fez* is unusual as a pixel game, because the voxels that make up everything in the game world are actually rendered in 3D – game designer Phil Fish crafted custom 2D pixel art and his programmer, Renaud Bédard, designed software that wrapped each custom tile-face to the side of each voxel, making the game look 2D whilst operating in 3D. That stunning art style informs the core mechanic of the game, which sees you solve increasingly devious puzzles based on your perception of 2D planes in levels constructed in 3D layers. There's been nothing quite like *Fez* before, and we doubt there will be for a while yet.

Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP (2011)
Genre: Non-Vocal Adventure

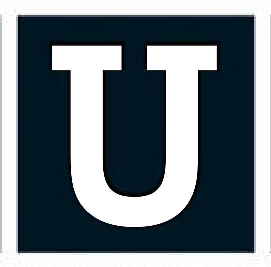
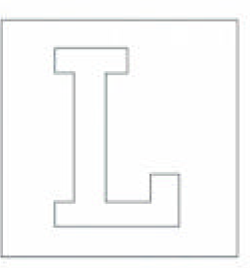
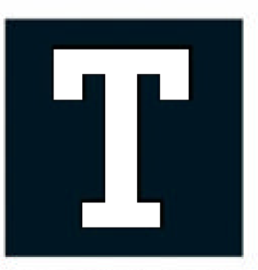
9 A game that managed to break through in both the East and the West, *Sword & Sworcery EP* was one of the first hugely successful art games released on iOS. Supported by a fantastic soundtrack composed by Jim Guthrie, and a delicately detailed art style making the most of the 16-bit-inspired pixel art, *Sword & Sworcery EP* introduces the player to one of the lushest, most interesting worlds ever committed to a mobile device. Compounded with an interface that's so intuitive it puts other iOS games to shame, *Sword & Sworcery EP* was a solid proof of concept for retro-inspired art games on mobile.

Terraria (2011)
Genre: Sandbox Survival And World-Builder

10 Each game of *Terraria* is different – working your way through a procedurally-generated world, the player is given a pickaxe to mine resources, a sword for combat, and an axe for woodcutting. Sound familiar? *Terraria* is the 2D equivalent of *Minecraft*, and looks infinitely better for it – the lo-fi graphics of the world's biggest game pale in comparison to Re-Logic's vivid pixel-art interpretation. Despite initial appearances, the gameplay aspect of *Terraria* is also *much* deeper – with much more of a boss/character-led experience than *Minecraft*. Its lack of tutorial and direction received some criticism, but we actually found it incredibly refreshing.

THE



VAULT

MO-FI HEADPHONES



MANUFACTURER: **BLUE** PRICE: **£274.99**

THESE COMPLETELY BONKERS-looking headphones from Blue are unlike anything we've seen before – these bad boys are more flexible than most dancers. The unique design features a headband that hinges in two places, so the sides of the headphones grip tightly to your ears. Oh, what's that? They're a little tight on your head? No problem, just use the dial on the top to reduce the tension in the hinges and loosen the grip slightly.

Not that we think many people will be complaining about discomfort – the huge pads on the ear cups are designed to be ear-shaped, so they sit nicely over your sound-flaps while blocking out the noise of the outside world. Thanks to the rotating joints that attach the cups to the headband, you can adjust the angle until you get a perfect fit on your head.

The quality continues to the sound, too – the 50mm dynamic drivers deliver some incredibly impressive sound, especially with the audiophile amplifier switched on. You can charge up the Mo-Fi headphones through USB and enjoy up to 12 hours of powered-up analogue sound. It's fantastic, and with two modes (including a bass-boosting mode for those that prefer things deep) you'll get perfection every time. When the battery does run dry, the sound continues and still sounds pretty darn good. They're expensive, and aren't built specifically for gaming, but if you're looking for an outstanding pair of over-ear headphones that work for solo PC or mobile gaming then these are quite literally the best we've ever heard. If Blue added a mic or console compatibility, these would be worth even more in our opinion.



TETRIS LIGHTS

These tabletop tetrominoes might not test your *Tetris* skills, but they will look cool on your desk… You can stack the blocks in any combination you like, and as they connect the light will spread, illuminating your table with colourful shapes.
www.firebox.com



ORIGINAL PLAYSTATION BAG

If you celebrated the tenth anniversary of the PSone in December, then this is the perfect bag to store all of your PlayStation accessories while reminding people around you how awesome gaming was back in 1994.
www.insertcoinclothing.com



VAULT BOY BOBBLEHEADS

While you *Fallout* fans are waiting for the announcement of the fourth game in the series, why not pick up these Vault Boy bobbleheads, turn your garden into a postapocalyptic wasteland and pretend it's already out?
www.geekvault.co.uk

GAMING CLOTHING



GHOST OF SPARTA HOODIE

If you were to describe *God Of War*'s hero, Kratos, in one word, 'subtle' probably wouldn't be it. But this hoodie certainly is as it is mimicking Kratos' red body paint spiral very simply.

www.insertcoinclothing.com



BLOW TO PLAY

Harking back to the good old days where 'take it out and blow on it' was a genuine troubleshooting tip for gamers, this tee drops in a cheeky IKEA reference, for all you lovers of Swedish-made furniture.

www.threadless.com



THE PROTECTOR

Bring back happy memories of exploring Rapture with this silhouette of a Big Daddy and Little Sister. The two seem to be in some kind of city apartment, though – we blame global warming to be honest.

www.threadless.com

STEELSERIES STRATUS XL

PRICE: **FROM £99-169**

THIS BRAND NEW, full-sized controller finally marks the start of serious gaming on mobile devices. If you're thinking it looks familiar, then you'd be right – it bears more than a striking resemblance to the Xbox One controller. But that's not a bad thing. In fact, for the first time in a long time, mobile gamers can enjoy using a controller that feels close to console-quality. Pressure-sensitive buttons, analogue triggers and two grippy joysticks deliver accurate control. It works with iOS devices and Macs, and has hundreds of supported games.

www.steelseries.com





MOGA PRO POWER FOR ANDROID

SOLD BY: **AMAZON** PRICE: **£54.90**

THE OTHER TWO controllers may be iOS only, however, Android users haven't been left out in the cold. This controller from Moga offers full-sized comfort, with analogue triggers and clickable thumbsticks. There's a fold-out clip built-in to the controller, so you can slot in your Android phone and play at the perfect angle. It'll even help you keep playing for longer – the built-in 2200mAh battery can be used to charge up your phone while you play, so you won't have to stop after a measly 20 minutes of gameplay.

www.mogaanywhere.com

MAD CATZ C.T.R.L.I

SOLD BY: **MAD CATZ** PRICE: **£49.99**

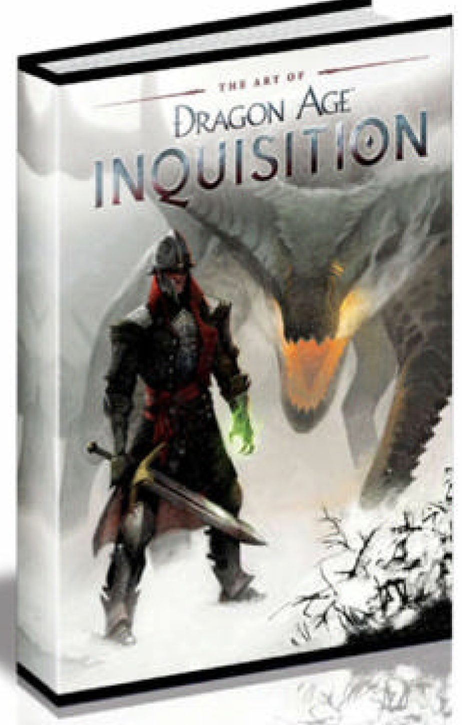
THE MAD CATZ C.T.R.L.i might have a stupid name, but it boasts some pretty cool features. It has all the buttons and triggers you would expect from a console-quality controller, but it also offers a smartphone clip that attaches to the back of the handset. Clip in your smartphone and you'll be able to play your games without worrying about where your device is sitting. There's even a C.T.R.L.i app that enables you to customise the button configuration of the controller for use on all of your favourite games.

www.madcatz.com





THE ART OF DRAGON AGE INQUISITION



PUBLISHER: **DARK HORSE**

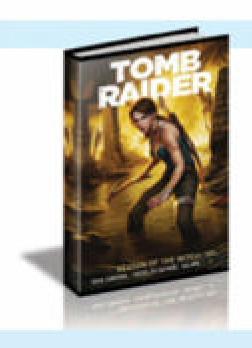
NOT EVERY ART book brings the detail, commentary and quality that this title from Dark Horse manages. For *Dragon Age* fans, especially those that loved the latest entry in the series, this title offers a genuinely interesting insight into the creative process behind the huge game. Early character designs sit alongside descriptions of how each design came about – the people that helped sculpt the art for the game describe the creative process, and you can feel their love for their creation as you read. Small comments about how much fun it is to look back on early sketches and see how much changed in the final game is lovely to see.

There's a good mix of character art and set design, along with storyboards for some of the more memorable cutscenes in the game. It's easy to forget just how much work goes into each level of a game of *Dragon Age*'s size, but this book will make you appreciate how many tiny details are sketched before anything is rendered in 3D.

Forewords from art director Matthew Goldman and creative director Mike Laidlaw reveal interesting details, like the art team being inspired by northern Renaissance work and simple Japanese prints – we really love some of this early artwork. The comic book-style designs in particular caught our eye – we would have loved to see a future game in the series designed in that style, or even just a spin-off graphic novel.

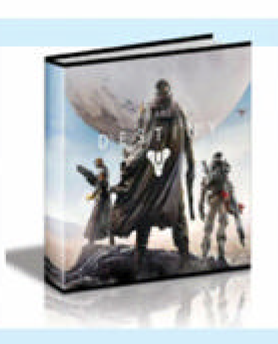
For fans of the series this is a brilliant purchase, but there's enough here to interest even those who have never played a *Dragon Age* game.
www.darkhorse.com

VERDICT 8/10



TOMB RAIDER VOL 1: SEASON OF THE WITCH

Following on from Lara's most recent adventures on the island of Yamatai, the first comic in a new series finds the young heroine struggling with horrific visions. As she tries to piece her life back together, the dreams threaten to do more than just keep her up at night…
www.darkhorse.com



THE ART OF DESTINY

For those wanting to dive deeper into the world of *Destiny*, this is the perfect title to do just that. Taking fans through the creation process of one of the most popular games of the new generation, it pulls together hundreds of sketches to show how the game went from concept art to reality.
www.titanbooks.com



HALO: ESCALATION #12

Perfectly placed between the release of *Halo: The Master Chief Collection* and *Halo 5: Guardians*, Dark Horse is releasing the final entry in the Escalation series. Disaster looms as two Spartans race to track down a mysterious weapon of mass destruction before it's too late…
www.darkhorse.com



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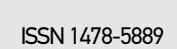
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